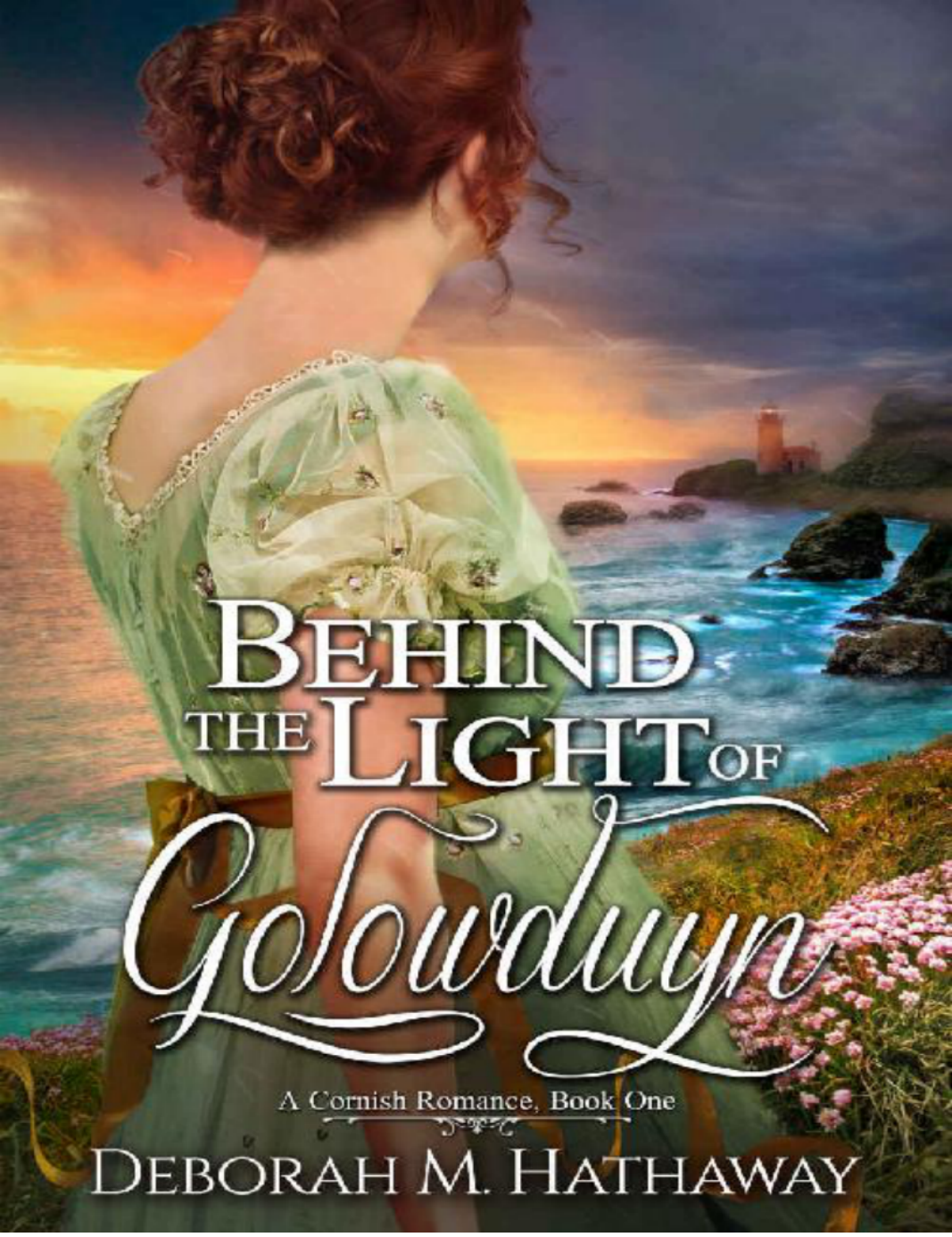

BEHIND
THE LIGHT OF
Golowduyn
A Cornish Romance, Book One
DEBORAH M. HATHAWAY

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A Cornish Romance, Book One

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This book is a work of fiction. All character names and personalities are entirely fictional, created solely in the imagination of the author. Any resemblance to any person living or dead is coincidental.

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Books by Deborah M. Hathaway

Stand Alone Novels
A Secret Fire
When Two Rivers Meet
To Warm a Wintered Heart

A Cornish Romance Series
On the Shores of Tregalwen, a Prequel Novella
Behind the Light of Golowduyn, Book 1

For Lydia, Ethan, & Rachael—
My three shining lights.

May you one day discover a place
that brings you as much joy and peace as
Cornwall brings to me.

I love you.

Pronunciation Guide

Golowduyn – goal-oh-DEW-in
Dulatha – dew-LAH-thah
Tregalwen – treh-GAWL-when
Glastaish – Glass-STAISH
Pryvly – PRIV-lee

Chapter One

Cornwall, 1815

Perched at the edge of Dulatha Cliffs, Golowduyn Lighthouse towered high upon the earth. Wind from the Cornish sea blasted against the structure, but nothing hindered the tower's light as the evening sun disappeared behind the dark clouds on the horizon.

Waves crashed against the jagged rocks at the base of the cliffs, spraying water high into the air. To the south of the lighthouse, the smooth sand of Golowduyn Beach thinned in the incoming tide. The ocean swirled—a warning to take shelter from the approaching storm.

But Abigail Moore heeded no such warning.

Standing between the lighthouse and the cliffs' edge, she braced herself against the wind. Her dark red tresses flew out behind her, her hairpins long since removed.

She watched the storm with a fixed gaze, blue eyes steady, until a flash of lightning lit the clouds before her. Only then did she turn toward home.

She pulled her threadbare shawl tightly around her shoulders and ran her free fingers in a caress along the light brown stone of the lighthouse.

She craned her neck to see the steady light shining above her before she rounded the circular building. As the first raindrops began to fall, she reached the small house attached to the front and stepped inside, securing the door behind her.

She hung her shawl on the hook near the door, careful not to snag one of the many holes in the worn, brown fabric.

"Uncle Ellis?" she called out.

"In here."

Abigail followed his voice down the short hallway, greeting her uncle with a smile as she entered the sitting room. Ellis Moore's eyes remained on the pages of his book.

"The storm promises to be fierce tonight," she said. Her boots

thumped softly against the floor as she moved to the back of the room and opened a window. “We have certainly seen worse, though. And will in future, no doubt.”

“Indeed,” Uncle Ellis mumbled. His chin doubled as his head dipped toward the book in his lap.

Abigail knew better than to wait for more of a response. Her uncle wasn’t much of a conversationalist. Not anymore, at any rate.

She had once enjoyed their pleasant conversations that had, at times, lasted for hours on end. Now she was fortunate if she could get more than a few sentences out of her uncle throughout an entire day.

She returned her attention to the darkening ocean, forcing her mind away from her disheartening thoughts. Drops of rain speckled the floor’s distressed wood near her feet, but she didn’t close the window.

The scent of the sea and storm did much for the stale air in the room. Faded rugs, dusty furniture, and piles of old books had been causing the musty smell for months.

Abigail wondered when she’d be able to find the time to clean the room again.

“I secured the stable doors,” she said, only too aware that she was carrying on a conversation with herself. “With any luck, they will remain upright through the storm this time.”

Silence met her words again, but when she glanced to her uncle, she was surprised to find him watching her. So he *was* listening. But then, why did he say nothing?

“What is it?” she asked, noting his eyes focused on her unpinned hair.

“When I see you in such a state, I am reminded of when you first came to Golowduyn.” A hint of a smile curved his mouth to one side. “Windblown hair. Rosy cheeks. Still as reluctant to come inside.”

Abigail attempted to run her fingers through her wavy locks, but the knots—formed earlier by the wind—prevented her. Her mind traveled back to when she had first seen Golowduyn, when the sea, the cliffsides, and the lighthouse were new to her nine-year-old eyes.

She had explored the land freely, watched the churning ocean as it stormed, and swam in the depths of the sea in the sunshine. She missed those carefree days, before her work had taken over.

But she would not dwell on the things of her past. She was more than content to look after the ships at sea. Even if she had little time for anything else. She smiled at her uncle. “I would still be out there if the lightning had not started, I assure you.”

As if on cue, another flash lit the clouds. Rumbling thunder followed, and she was reminded again of the task before her that evening. “Would you like a cup of tea before I see to the lamps,

Uncle?"

He shook his head. A deep crease stretched down between his graying eyebrows. "I wish I could help you."

"I know."

And she did, to her cost. Months had passed since Uncle Ellis had injured his knees in a fall, and still he could not climb to the top of the tower without acute pain. His spirits had steadily declined, while Abigail had assumed nearly all head keeper responsibilities. She loved Golowduyn and would do anything to keep it aglow. Though…she had grown weary with the amount of work required of her.

"There is a public assembly in St. Just next week," her uncle said, breaking into her thoughts. "I thought I might attend."

A memory sparked in her mind about a desire she'd had when she had first come of age—more than five years ago—to attend an assembly herself. She had imagined dancing the night away, then ending the evening with a proposal of marriage from a man who had fallen in love with her the moment he saw her.

But her way of life had quickly put an end to such silly dreams. She had never attended a dance, and she certainly would be unable to now. But that did not mean her uncle could not go and enjoy himself now.

"That might be just the thing you need to raise your spirits, Uncle," she said.

He looked down at the book resting in his lap. "I would offer to look after the light and suggest you go in my stead, but I believe we both know the answer to that already."

"Yes, we do."

He drummed his fingers along his cane that rested in its usual spot, on the settee beside him. "You might enjoy yourself, though."

Abigail could not make sense of his words. He had never encouraged her to attend, not even before he was injured and she *could* have left the lighthouse in his care. So why the sudden change?

"All the same, I would rather not attend, Uncle," she responded.

Her answer was mostly true. She felt far more comfortable in the safety of Golowduyn than in the midst of a room filled with strangers. She did not belong like her uncle did. He may be penniless, but he was a gentleman.

And Abigail? Abigail was merely a lighthouse keeper's niece.

A cold wind blew through the room, splashing rain upon the front of her skirts. She closed the window and crossed the wooden floor toward Uncle Ellis.

"I hope you will attend, Uncle, and enjoy yourself to your heart's content." She placed a kiss atop his graying hair. "We may talk more about it on the morrow, if you wish to. Goodnight."

Uncle Ellis picked up his book and held it before him, though his eyes remained stationary on the page. He grunted a half-hearted response.

Abigail ignored his crestfallen appearance and left the room. She had sympathy for her uncle, of course. To feel helpless was a miserable sensation, but she did not have time to commiserate. The waning light beckoned, and if she neglected it, lives would be at risk.

She moved down the hallway to where a thin passageway joined the small home to the tower. An iron, spiraled staircase stood at the back of a large circular room lined with old cots and a pile of wood. She paused at the bottom of the steps, one hundred and seventeen of them stretching ominously above her.

There was a time she had enjoyed the ascent. She would carry a tray of food while her uncle brought up a stack of books. And when they reached the top of the tower, she'd read aloud to him for hours as they kept watch over the stormy seas until the sun shone again.

But now, she had no one's company but her own.

With a weary sigh, she raised her skirts and began her climb. But each step was a battle as she attempted to convince herself that she was prepared for another lonely night keeping the lamps of Golowduyn Lighthouse burning bright.

* * *

"Hold steady, men, courage!" Captain Gavin Kendricks called out as he walked across the main deck of the HMS *Valour*. "We have seen storms of smoke and fire, of enemy cannons and death. We will see through this wind and rain!"

Shouts of affirmation sounded from the sailors as they worked together to secure the halyards. Gavin's eyes traveled the length of the masts to the yards. The white sails were pulled taut, curved and stretched in the fierce wind.

The sails would not hold for long. He and his men would soon need to wait out the storm by mooring the ship. His crew was impatient to reach land after months of being at sea, but he would rather keep them safe than risk their lives by pushing through an unpassable storm.

Gavin tapped a finger on his leg. His fifteen years at sea had taught him to be disciplined, patient. And yet, he felt even more anxious than the others to reach the port in Penzance. Perhaps it was the fifteen years that had caused him to feel restless on that voyage, or perhaps because he knew it was time—time for a change, for something more fulfilling than a life upon the sea.

He imagined the letter he would soon write to his brother—informing him of his safe arrival in England, of his plans to visit as he

waited for his reassignment, to discuss his desire to request his leave from the navy once and for all.

But now was certainly not the time to think of what awaited him on land. He set aside his rambling thoughts and climbed the steps to the quarterdeck where the helmsman gripped the wheel.

"St. Ives lies behind us, Captain," Mr. Clamp said.

"Excellent." Gavin looked out over the ship. Lightning flashed in the clouds above, his men mere shadows as they moved across the main deck. They were making steady progress. Perhaps they would not have to lower the anchors after all. "We are nearing the end of our journey, Mr. Clamp. I should like to see it finish with—"

His words muffled as a wave crashed against the side of the *Valour*. Water washed over the starboard side, pouring across the upper decks and sweeping sailors from their feet.

Gavin reached for a nearby railing, striving to remain upright as the water reached midway up his stockings.

"Captain," the quartermaster said next to Mr. Clamp, "we cannot run before the wind any longer, sir. She veers too greatly. We will be blown straight toward land."

Gavin crossed the wooded deck to the port side, straining to see farther into the darkness. His eyes were drawn to a small, glowing light in the distance, and his insides grew cold.

Golowduyn Lighthouse.

His worrying should have been settled at the sight. After all, the light was meant to ensure that sailors kept away from the dangerous shores. But with his ship being pushed closer and closer to the cliffs that protruded into the water—the cliffs he knew had taken the lives of many sailors—he felt anything but comforted.

Still, he would not allow his men to meet with early graves right before the end.

He turned his back on the light and moved to the helm. "Stand by to take in mainsail!"

The midshipmen relayed his message across the main deck, their voices muffled as the *Valour* tossed violently back and forth. Seamen worked to furl the sails, but their advancement toward land continued.

"Captain, she will not lie to," Mr. Clamp cried out.

Gavin's jaw tightened. His hands fisted as he looked over his shoulder to see the flashing light of Golowduyn growing stronger. He could not risk them drawing any closer to the coastline. Not if he wanted them to have any chance of survival.

He stepped down onto the main deck before giving his next command. "All hands, bring ship to anchor!"

A few sailors ran to the starboard side, unfastening the anchor to

dangle over the water from the cathead—a thick structure sticking out from the ship to aid in anchoring.

The boatswain, Mr. Perry, oversaw the thick cables being brought up from the orlop below, and the seamen wound the long rope in loops across the deck before securing the anchor to one end. Once fastened, they released the anchor, and it sailed through the air before plunging into the murky sea.

The cable fed through a hole near the side of the ship until it tugged securely on the beam. Still, the ship drifted with the waves.

Gavin's heart raced. His eyes flickered to the lighthouse. Was his mind playing tricks on him, or did they approach land faster than before?

"Lower the second anchor!" he shouted.

The port side anchor was dropped into the water. Gavin moved to the ladder near the quarterdeck, grasping onto a step, his feet planted firmly on the ground.

"Brace! Brace!"

As the rope lessened across the deck—the anchor sinking deeper and deeper into the sea—Gavin watched with bated breath until they jerked forward, and the anchor caught.

The ship moved to one side. The waves battered the bulwark.

"Even her out!" Gavin called.

The midshipmen rushed to the edges of the ship, making way for more than a dozen brawny forecastlemen tearing their way across the *Valour* toward the capstan. Gavin watched as they wrapped their arms around the bars, using the weight of their large bodies to slowly turn the structure, shortening the first cable to position the ship between its two anchors.

At last, the *Valour* settled on the water, and cheers erupted from the men. Gavin's mouth parted, a slow breath releasing from his lips. The tension in his shoulders lessened, and he climbed the steps to the quarterdeck.

But when another shout rose above the others, he stiffened.

"Fire! Fire on the gun deck!"

A flash of lightning lit the *Valour*, and Gavin swung around, eying the black plumes of smoke rising from the starboard side, a ghostly shape against the rain.

He cursed, jumping down and landing on the main deck with a thud. He flew toward the ladder to the lower decks, his mind spinning and anger pulsing through his veins. There could be only one reason a fire had started—one of the men must have had a lantern out during the storm.

Whoever it was, the sailor would be sorry, once Gavin caught him.

Footsteps pounded across the gun deck. Dark smoke filled the area, sliding along the ceiling. An assembly line had already formed, men seeing to the flames with buckets of water and wet blankets.

"Lieutenant Harris!" Gavin shouted, spotting his first lieutenant running toward him. "How fares the foremast?"

"It weakens, sir," the man said, his face red from the heat of the flames. "The fire has already spread below. It will reach the powder magazine if it is not extinguished soon."

Gavin released a frustrated growl, heading for the ladder. "Find the fool who has put us all at risk," he growled over his shoulder. "I'll throw him overboard myself."

"Sir," Lieutenant Harris said, following behind him, "I believe we already know the culprit."

They reached the main deck, and Gavin whirled around to face him as his eyes adjusted to the darkness around them. A fire sparked in his chest, his blood burning.

"Where is Sanders?" he said, taking a step toward the lieutenant, his voice low.

"He's still shackled below, sir," Lieutenant Harris responded in a tone that matched the captain's. "But he was calm, as if he wasn't aware of what awaited him on land."

"Every sailor knows what to expect if he assaults his captain." Gavin ran his fingers over the knuckles of his right hand—the fist he'd used more than a week before to lay Sanders flat on the floor before the drunken man could land a punch of his own. "Has his brother been kept away from him?"

Sanders's younger brother, Myles, had dutifully followed his brother aboard the ship their entire voyage. Gavin was sure the boy would do anything for his elder brother. And that was what worried Gavin the most.

"We've tried, Captain," Lieutenant Harris said, clearly hesitating. "When the storm began, Mr. Perry was ensuring the lanterns were extinguished below, and he saw Myles near the orlop. He sent him back up, but…the boy may have spoken to his brother without notice during the chaos."

"Then he was able to move up to start the fire on the gun deck without notice, as well. No doubt under his brother's direction." Gavin wiped the rain from his face. "I should have removed them both from the *Valour* the moment I saw them. Ensure Myles remains at his post until we reach Penzance. He mustn't…"

A low creaking interrupted his words. The ropes of the anchor cables squeaked as they stretched. Gavin narrowed his eyes. The sound was not one he recognized when a ship was moored. It sounded almost as if…

He glanced back to Harris, the officer's eyes widening with alarm before a loud crack pierced the air. The ship lurched forward, swaying to one side. Harris fell against the bulwark as Gavin stumbled a few paces back.

"The anchor!" Gavin shouted. "Harris, secure the foremast before it is compromised. And find Baring to flood the magazine!"

"Yes, sir!"

Before the lieutenant disappeared down the ladder, another snap cracked the air. The second anchor. How did both cables break so quickly? The ship jittered forward again, and Gavin held out his arms to steady himself. The glow from the lighthouse flashed in the corner of his eye.

"Ready the final anchor!" he commanded.

"Captain!"

Gavin crossed the main deck to where his second lieutenant crouched down by the cable.

"What is it, Lieutenant Johnson?"

"The hawser, sir. It was cut, deliberately."

Gavin hunched down next to the lieutenant, eying the thick ropes twisted together, each slashed halfway through. "This explains why the other cables did not hold."

"Yes, sir." Lieutenant Johnson leaned closer, lowering his voice. "Do you think it was…"

Gavin gave a sharp nod. "I've no doubt."

That must have been why Myles was found near the orlop, the boy was cutting their only link to safety. Gavin's stomach hardened, his neck stiff. The boy must have cut the cables before the storm worsened, then lit the fire when most of the crew was lowering the anchors.

Disgust filled him. The plan stunk of the elder Sanders. Of course the man did not care what happened to those aboard the *Valour*. After all, he was sure to hang once they reached Penzance. But did he not even give a thought to his younger brother? And how had he managed to convince Myles to go along with it?

"What are your orders, Captain?"

Gavin stood up from the cable. He could no longer dwell on the Sanders brothers. Not when his ship was filled with more than two hundred good and able men he needed to protect.

"Lower the final anchor," he said, "if only to provide us with a moment longer of safety away from the shores."

As the third and final anchor plummeted into the sea, Gavin returned to the quarterdeck. Mr. Clamp grasped the wheel, attempting to maintain control of the ship.

Gavin moved to his side to help.

“What are we to do, sir?”

Gavin attempted to look where the ship should have been heading, but his eyes inevitably focused east through the rain.

Golowduyn’s outline was now clearly visible, even through the darkness. Destruction and death awaited them, should they collide with Dulatha Cliffs. That much he knew.

But was a death upon the rocks any worse than the powder magazine catching fire, the foremast collapsing into the water, or the ship capsizing?

No. He knew what needed to be done. And he would have the courage to do it—if only for his men.

“Do you plan an attempt to beach, sir?” Mr. Clamp asked, his voice tense. He had no doubt seen the look of determination on his captain’s face. “You know those cliffs as well as I, Captain, and the sailors who have perished there before.”

“Yes,” Gavin said, “but if we stop the *Valour* from reaching the larger rocks, and the bow makes contact with the smaller ones first, then the magazine will fill faster.”

Not all of them would survive the impact, but at least most of the crew would be saved from being blown apart.

Mr. Clamp drew in a deep breath. “Yes, sir.”

“When I give the order,” Gavin said, “release the helm.”

He planted his feet apart. His muscles strained from the pull of the wheel. They watched, waiting as the ship neared the strengthening light.

They were nearing the end of their journey. They would have reached Penzance by morning. How had things turned so suddenly? He should not be fighting for the safety of his men. He should be anticipating the feel of the land beneath his feet. He should be writing a letter to his brother below in his cabin. He should be wondering what he would do after retirement.

But now, none of that mattered. He had spent so long at sea, searching for a purpose to his life, a purpose he had been unable to find.

Would his career end that evening? Would his life? He knew the *Valour* was lost already. But he feared how many of his men would fall—how many of his men he had failed.

The lighthouse towered before them. “Brace!” he shouted, pushing aside his regrets and apprehension. “Brace for impact!”

He nodded to Mr. Clamp, and together, they stood back.

The helm spun rapidly in the opposite direction. The boat responded with a broad, swinging movement toward the rocks. Gavin craned his neck, watching as the lighthouse loomed above them—the final image before the sounds of crumpling wood shook the air.

Gavin flew back, slamming sideways against the hull as the starboard side near the bow splintered to pieces. His hat flew over the edge of the ship. A sharp pain pierced through the back of his upper arm, and he growled through clenched teeth.

He tried to remain upright, but the searing ache in his arm caused his knees to buckle. Falling forward away from the bulwark, he felt a release of pressure as something slid out from within his arm.

Glancing over his shoulder, he saw a splintered piece of wood sticking upright behind him, his own blood dripping from the tip of it.

He pushed himself up from his knees on the quarterdeck, wincing as he moved down the steps. He willed his mind to focus on what occurred around him, rather than the burning in his arm.

"Ready the boats! See to the wounded!"

Gavin stared at the chaos around him as the *Valour* settled farther onto the protruding rocks. Waves reached over the hull. Water flowed across the deck.

His gaze shifted from the sailors helping their injured shipmates to beyond the swaying foremast, where smoke billowed from the ship and headed in the direction of the lighthouse glowing above them.

The words blurred on the pages of the book Abigail read. Her eyes drifted to a close. Her head sank low, but a sensation of falling soon jerked her awake. She opened her eyes to find herself still seated at the edge of a cot.

"Wake up," she said, tossing the book down onto the small bed and patting her cheeks as she stood.

She glanced up through the small, latched door in the ceiling of the watch room to see the lamps of the lighthouse still aglow. Then she approached the window that overlooked the blackened sea.

Her stomach growled. She reached toward the small table close by for a piece of her leftover dinner—a slice of bread and a piece of cheese—and chewed the crust through a yawn.

Rain slid down the glass, hindering any clear sight. She moved back and forth to see past the droplets. She made for another piece of bread, but her hand paused midair when she caught sight of something rising above the cliff's edge.

She leaned forward, and the blood drained from her face. "Oh, no."

A flash of lightning lit the sea, and she could no longer deny the smoke blowing toward the land, nor the tips of the masts at the bottom of Dulatha Cliffs.

"Uncle!" she cried out. She ran to the door, ringing the large bell that hung on the wall nearby. "Uncle, there has been a shipwreck!"

With the sounded bell still reverberating in her ears, she snatched

a few hairpins and a boy's cap from off of the table, pinning up her locks and placing the cap firmly on her head as she flew down the steps.

"Uncle Ellis!"

"Abigail? Is it a shipwreck?"

She breathed a sigh of relief. At last he was awake.

"Yes," she replied, sliding her hand along the railing as she took the steps two at a time. Her head spun with the spiraling staircase. "There is smoke coming from the wreckage. I must show the survivors the safest way to shore."

"No, I forbid it," her uncle said at once, his voice sounding above her boots clanging against the iron stairs. "Abigail, you cannot go out into such a storm. Not again."

She reached the bottom of the stairs and soared past him without a glance. "We cannot shirk our duty. I will take care, Uncle."

She reached the front door and pulled on a small jacket, ignoring her uncle's frustrated grumblings as he followed behind her. She knew he cared for her safety, and she did not like to disobey him, but they both understood their obligations as keepers.

He extended a glowing lantern to her with a grunt.

"I will return soon," she said, retrieving the light. "Watch the lamps from the sitting room while I'm away."

She did not await his response before she charged forth across the grass and into the wind and rain, praying Golowduyn would remain lit so her uncle would not have to climb the stairs to relight the lamps—for she did not know if he could do either one.

She heaved open the door to the stables, and her blue roan knickered, sticking her head over the stall door.

"Come, Glastaish," Abigail said, hooking the lantern securely on the wall. "We must ride swiftly tonight."

She secured the bridle and sidesaddle on the horse and pulled her outside, using her free hand to hold the lantern out in front of her. With the mounting block, she settled in the sidesaddle then urged Glastaish forward.

"Take care, Abigail!"

She looked over her shoulder to see her uncle's silhouette in the doorway of their home. She raised her lantern in parting and rode across the dark cliffside.

Rain splashed against her face, blurring her vision. She loosened her hold of the reins, allowing Glastaish to find the safest ground as they rounded the ridge and reached the pathway that led to Golowduyn Beach. The horse slid down the steep, sandy slope before racing south, away from the lighthouse and Dulatha Cliffs.

Abigail pulled her to a stop when they reached the large rocks at

the far end of the beach. The mare snorted beneath her, stomping her hooves on the sand.

Abigail held the lantern aloft, slowly moving it from side to side, praying the sailors would know that following the light would lead to their safety.

Her eyes scanned the dark waves coming in one after the other. There was no sign of a single boat. They could still be trying to fill them…unless, of course, there were no survivors at all.

Her morbid fears impelled her eyes to focus on the shipwreck. In an instant, she wished she hadn't.

Orange flames lit the ship leaning up against the rocks. The masts and yards teetered back and forth, the sails whipping wildly in the wind, having no doubt become loosened in the storm.

A mere six months had passed since the last shipwreck had occurred on Golowduyn's shores. Over sixty men had perished due to the raging storm and a captain who chose to sail too closely to the land.

Was that the reasoning behind the shipwreck this night? Or had the seas simply taken control of the vessel? Either way, Golowduyn had failed them—*she* had failed them. But she would do everything in her power to rescue any who survived, just as she had done before.

She pulled her attention back to the sea, waiting anxiously for the sight of any survivors. Her arm began to tremble, the blood draining from her hand as she continued moving the lantern in the air.

Finally, a single boat emerged from behind the farthest rocks. Its own light hovered just above the water as it made headway, despite the choppy waves. Her muscles tensed until the boat changed direction, moving farther south, away from the protrusive rocks.

They had seen her warning. She released a constrained breath, relief overcoming her.

Soon, another, larger boat emerged. More survivors. Were there additional men on the ship for whom they would return? She glanced back to the wreckage. She needed to know, to prepare herself if these boats held all who had survived.

She reined Glastaish closer to the rocks, tucking the lantern into a crevice between two large boulders. After ensuring it would not fall—and the light remained visible to the boats progressing slowly across the water—she urged her horse across the wet sand.

When they reached the north end, she tied Glastaish near the bottom of the cliffs and ran to the small boat that was secured out of the water's reach. A small bag was tucked under a wooden plank. She rummaged past spare fishing line and a few seashells before her hand settled on cold metal.

There it was. She pulled the old, nearly-rusted telescope out of

the bag and peered through the glass with her right eye. Focusing on the damaged ship, she could easily count twenty men on the upper deck. There had to be even more below deck, working the bilge pumps and flooding the magazine. How many of the crew were wounded, though? And how many had already suffered death?

A weariness pressed on her heart, a familiar feeling of fault she experienced each time she did not prevent a shipwreck from occurring. After all, that was why she looked after the lamps in the first place—to ensure the safety of sailors. What was she doing if she could not even protect them?

She moved the telescope to the south end of the beach where the boats finally reached the shoreline. Men jumped into the waves to clamber the rest of the way through the shallow water, allowing the boats to return to the ship faster. Abigail would have offered her own boat to aid in their rescue, but her small vessel could barely hold two bodies. She knew she should be riding to them already, offering them shelter at the lighthouse or directions to the nearest town. But she could not leave the sight of the ship. At least, not until she was certain no one had been left behind.

She fixed her telescope once more on the ruins. Men clung to halyards and railings to prevent falling into the sea as the waves slammed against the hull. Wood snapped, the sound cracking through the air and driving fear into Abigail's heart. Even still, she knew what she felt was nothing compared to the sailors' unease waiting aboard the ship for the return of the boats.

The main deck rumbled beneath Gavin's feet as the *Valour* leaned against the rocks. They were taking on water too quickly. The boats would need to hasten if the rest of the crew was to survive. Gavin's wound had morphed from a dull ache into a pulsing throb with each movement he made, but he could not keep still, not while his men needed a captain.

After ensuring the sailors still worked away at the pumps, hoping to prolong the life of their already sinking ship, Gavin returned to the main deck.

He had no idea the number of men he'd lost in the bedlam of the storm and the collision, and he struggled not to dwell on the fact that they might have all been spared if he'd had the foresight to shackle not only Sanders, but his younger brother, as well.

The only problem was, he had yet to see the boy, Myles, that evening. In fact, no one he'd spoken to had seen Myles since the onslaught of the storm. He could have perished already, for all Gavin knew. But Sanders…he still lived.

Gavin turned toward the ladder to the quarterdeck where the man

stood in shackles, Lieutenant Johnson diligently watching over him.

The manacled seaman's cheekbones were sunken in, and his face held an impassive, uncaring expression—despite the destruction around him.

Gavin strode across the deck, maintaining his gaze on Sanders, though the man did not look up at him as he approached.

"Lieutenant Johnson," Gavin said, "ensure Sanders takes the last boat with you. And keep him away from his brother. Myles will be better off without this sorry excuse for a family in his life."

Sanders's eyes slowly rose, and the look within their dark depths would have chilled Gavin to his core, had he not been just as angry himself.

The man lunged forward with a growl of fury, and Gavin brought up his arm to stop the attack, flinching as his wound shot a stabbing ache through his muscles.

Lieutenant Johnson pulled Sanders back before either of them could make contact with the other.

"You will face the consequences for what you have done tonight, Sanders," Gavin said through clenched teeth, using every last shred of his power to prevent himself from serving justice to the man right there aboard the *Valour*. He pointed his finger in Sanders's face and spoke each word with clarity. "As will your brother."

Sanders sneered, swearing at the captain before Gavin tossed his head, and Lieutenant Johnson pulled the seaman away.

Gavin drew in a deep breath.

He could not wait for the moment he would finally be rid of the Sanderses—both of them.

As the night wore on, Gavin lost count of the number of times the boats had returned and left, each filled to its capacity. His mind dwelled on the men who lay wounded around him. He did not yet know how many had perished, and though he prayed the number was not great, his sense told him to prepare for the worst.

Slowly, the crowds of sailors thinned, and he and Harris were the only ones left on board.

"The smaller boat is full, Captain," the lieutenant said, coming up behind Gavin on the quarterdeck. "We will have to wait for the other to return."

Gavin released a slow breath, crossing the deck to look over the bulwark at the frothing waves below. His left arm dangled uselessly at his side. "I am happy to wait, if that ensures the safety of the others."

He glanced to the rocks, silently waiting until he caught sight of the small boat disappearing into the darkness.

"I'm sure they will return soon, Captain," Lieutenant Harris said, leaning against the bulwark beside Gavin. "And when they do, I shall

find myself a fine Cornish pasty—even if I must go begging for it."

Gavin glanced at him sidelong, noting the mischief shining in the lieutenant's eyes. He had seen the look countless times in the five years they'd known each other, starting out together as lieutenants in their early-twenties.

Directly after the many storms and battles they'd experienced at sea, Harris had always had a remarkable ability to cheer up those around him—to help them forget their troubles, if only for a while—by either talking of food or women.

Gavin had always welcomed the distraction, and that moment wasn't any different. After all, he could do with forgetting the fact that they both stood onboard a ship that could turn over in the rocks at any moment. With the rest of his men safe, he found avoiding his apprehension to be rather difficult.

"I can taste it now, sir," Harris continued, as if he did not notice the waves still battering the ship, nor the flames licking at the bow. "Filled with enough beef and potatoes to satisfy me for weeks. Like when we were stationed in Falmouth years ago. Do you remember?"

The ship creaked. Gavin clasped the edge with his right hand. There was still no sign of the returning boat. "Yes, I recall you eating so much you could hardly fit into your breeches the next day when meeting our new captain."

Harris smiled. "Well, I had to eat my fill. I knew the quality of the food we'd be eating soon and needed to—"

A wave burst over the ship's edge, pouring over the hull and ending Harris's words as both he and Gavin were swept from their feet.

Gavin rolled to his stomach and grasped onto a broken beam just within his reach, holding tightly until the water ran over the starboard side.

He coughed, expelling water from his lungs. "Leave it to you to distract us with talks of food, Harris," he wheezed. He glanced over his shoulder with a smile. "Harris?"

His eyes darted around him, and his chest caved in. "Harris!"

Gavin blanched, running to the edge of the ship where he saw the lifeless body of his friend face-down in the water and draped limply across a broken plank of wood.

"Man overboard!" he bellowed, though he knew no one could hear him. His gaze was fixed on the lieutenant, but he could see from the corner of his eye that no boat had yet returned to the *Valour*.

Knowing better than to take his eyes off of the injured man for a single moment, Gavin moved his hands about him, feeling around for something, anything, that might help.

Finally, his foot thudded against something solid. He used the tip

of his shoe to raise the object—a rough, thick rope piled nearby—into his hands.

Ignoring his protesting wound, he tore off his blue captain's jacket and unraveled the rope, visualizing the amount he required. Once he knew the length of the line would suffice, he tied one end to the railing and the other around his waist.

He kept Harris's shadow in his eyeline and prayed the man would remain above the water.

After securing the knots, Gavin climbed atop the edge of the bulwark and steadied himself. He eyed the waves below and drew in a deep breath, jumping as far as his legs would allow.

He sailed through the air. The wind tore at his sleeves, the rain stinging his cheeks, until he plunged into the cold, unforgiving sea.

Abigail sucked in a breath. "No!"

Her heart stuttered. She had been scanning the ship for other survivors when she'd spotted the man plummeting into the sea. And now, she could no longer see him amidst the churning waves.

She pulled the telescope away from her eyes and looked to the opposite end of the beach. The larger boat was just reaching the shoreline—sailors dragging the wounded toward the sand—and the smaller boat was not too far behind it.

Abigail was certain neither of them could have seen beyond the rocks to witness the sailor's fall, nor would they be able to return to the ship before the man inevitably drowned.

But *she* had seen him…and *she* could reach him in time.

If she navigated through the rocks—rather than around them as the other sailors had—she would arrive at the ship in half the time, allowing the sailor a better chance at survival. The way was dangerous, but did she have any other choice after her own lighthouse had failed to keep the man safe?

Without another thought, she untied her small boat and heaved it toward the sea. She glanced over her shoulder at the wreckage. A constant barrage of waves crashed into the rocks, the flames illuminating the water nearby. Had they flooded the magazine before abandoning ship?

Fear slid its icy fingers around her throat, and she paused when she reached the first of the waves, water swirling around her boots and seeping into her stockings. Her boat was not powerful, nor was Abigail stronger than the churning waves. Would she even stand a chance with no lantern to guide her, amidst such rocks and stormy seas?

She gave a quick shake of her head. No, she would not cower. Not then.

Not while a sailor's life was at stake.

She jumped into the boat, and with her back to the shipwreck, she rowed out against the waves. The oars scraped on stone as the water pushed her closer to the rocks. Her arms burned with the exertion, but she pressed on, her eyes constantly darting behind her, desperate for any sighting of the man in the water.

As she neared the stern, a faint shout rose above the waves. She looked toward the sound in time to catch a glimpse of the sailor's hand waving above a large trunk floating in the water.

A surge of energy pulsed through her veins, and she pushed through the sea. "I am nearly there!"

Her limbs begged for respite, but she refused to stop. Rain and seawater stung her eyes. The smell of burning wood permeated the air.

"Here!" the voice called above the wind and water. "We are just here!"

"We?" she questioned. She had only seen a single body disappear into the water. Was there another?

At last, her boat bumped up against the trunk that the man clasped to with one arm. She secured the oars and looked over her shoulder to see, sure enough, two men floating in the water.

"Take him," the first sailor commanded, holding his unconscious mate above the waves. "Careful of his arm."

Abigail held onto one side of the boat for leverage as she grasped the unconscious man's shirt, helping to hoist him over the edge. His body fell limply at her feet.

She reached to help the other man over, but his head was lowered as he untied the rope around his waist, the line stretching to the ship's railing above. Was this the man she had seen falling? She had not noticed the rope before. Had he dived down to rescue the other?

A large wave dropped over them. Water splashed across her lap and over the unconscious man's body. She gripped onto both sides of the boat.

"Here!" shouted the sailor in the water, finally unfastened. "Give me your hand, boy!"

Abigail's fingers froze in midair. But before she could pull back, the man grasped her hand and heaved himself up, landing in the boat with a thud and a grunt as he grasped his upper arm.

The moment he was secure, Abigail pulled away, scowling as the three of them swayed unsteadily in the water.

The flames lit his face, his dark hair dripping water across his striking features. He traveled the length of her dress, past her jacket, then up to her face.

When his eyes widened, Abigail knew he had finally seen her.

Chapter Two

Gavin watched as the woman before him grasped the oars and rowed away from the wreckage around the outer edge of the rocks.

"You are not a—"

"No, I am not," she spat out without a single glance in his direction.

"No." He stared in shock at her features—high cheekbones, curved lips, round eyes.

"If my being female is unsettling for you," she said, shouting above the sound of another wave splashing across their laps, "I will take this sailor to shore and leave you here at the mercy of the sea."

Gavin shook his head. He tore his gaze away from the woman to focus on the lieutenant moaning at the bottom of the boat. He moved his feet around him, pressing a hand against Harris's chest and securing his head with the other.

"How is he?" the woman asked.

"His breathing is strong." He looked to the distended bone misshaping Harris's arm, dark blood covering his sleeve. "But he is wounded."

"Are there other men out here?"

Gavin eyed her jacket and cap. "We were the last two on the ship."

He was startled at her strength—despite her slight figure—as she led them through the water. He ought to offer his help, but with his left arm causing him even greater pain after his dive, he knew he would only hinder their progress. Besides, she seemed to be doing very well on her own.

The lieutenant moaned below, and Gavin hunched over him. "Harris?"

The lieutenant's eyes flashed open. His brow pursed, and panic promptly took over. He thrashed about the boat, shouting in agony as he moved his arm.

Gavin reached for him, grasping the sailor's shoulder and struggling to keep him down. Waves splashed against the boat, spraying water across their faces. "Stay still, Harris."

"Stop his moving!" the woman shouted.

"Do you not think I am attempting to do that, miss?" Gavin glanced at her sidelong, still trying to gain control of his friend's delirious state.

With an exasperated sigh, the woman reached forward. Gavin moved back as she grasped both sides of Harris's face.

"Sir?" she said, her tone soft in contrast to how she had spoken to Gavin. Instantly, Harris stopped, focusing on the woman above him. "I am Abigail Moore. You mustn't worry now. I will keep you safe."

Gavin wondered at the proper way in which she spoke. After all, the locals he'd come across during his previous stops in Cornwall had always boasted strong accents.

But he set aside his musing, staring as much as Harris did, both of them apparently in a trance as the woman, Miss Moore—or perhaps Mrs. Moore—continued.

"You have hurt your arm, sir," she continued, resting a hand upon his chest. "You must be still while I row you to shore. Then I will find you the help you need. Do you understand?"

Harris blinked mutely. His breathing leveled, and he closed his eyes. "Yes."

The woman straightened and took the oars once more. Harris settled back in the bottom of the boat, a grimace on his face, though he remained still. Gavin stared at the woman, wondering who she was and what she was doing rescuing sailors in the midst of a furious sea.

Abigail pursed her lips.

A boy. How could he have thought she was a boy?

She knew the darkness had played a contributing factor, as well as the sailor being distracted with saving himself and his mate. And then there was the glaring fact that her hair was tucked away, hidden beneath a boy's cap.

Still, the mistake had stung. Was it so difficult to imagine a female could know the rocks and the sea around Golowduyn as well as any man? Or was she more upset about the fact that she had not appeared feminine enough to be seen as the woman she was?

She knew she should not care. After all, she wasn't there to impress the sailors with her beauty and elegance.

She was there to rescue them.

Regardless, she did not know of any woman who would be happy in the knowledge that someone had mistaken her for a boy.

She glanced to the sailor as he leaned forward, keeping his

injured mate's head from bouncing against the side of the boat as the relentless waves carried them up and down.

His white waistcoat and breeches, the same as his companion's, signified their higher ranks—lieutenants, by the looks of them. They had been the last men aboard the ship. Did that mean the captain hadn't survived?

She glanced over her shoulder at the approaching shoreline. One of the boats was headed in their direction before slowly curving back to the land. They must have spotted Abigail's boat with the lightning still flashing overhead.

Before long, shouts upon the beach reached her ears as the other survivors ran toward the boats. She marveled at the number of men who had survived. And there were even more nearer the cliffs.

She jumped down into the knee-high water as the men helped her pull the boat securely onto the sand.

"Fetch your surgeon," she instructed.

One sailor ran in the direction of the group that had taken shelter near the rocks. The rest of them remained in front of Abigail, staring wide-eyed at her skirts and cap.

She pulled in her lips and sighed through her nose. She obviously needed to help the simpletons realize that she was, indeed, female. She removed her cap, and a few curls fell around her face before the rain flattened them upon her temples.

Perfect. Now the men only stared more.

"I must speak with your captain," she said before she could concoct another way to make them even more baffled. "Did he survive?"

A few of them exchanged looks. One of them stepped forward. "Sir?"

Abigail balked. Sir? Could they not see the dress she wore? Did they not see her long hair pinned up? Surely the light of their lanterns had revealed her sex to them.

"I am not a…"

She paused when she noted the sailor's eyes focusing over her shoulder. She turned to see a few men lifting the wounded officer from the boat then carrying him up the beach.

But her eyes were drawn to the other man she had saved who remained behind.

He stood to his full height, his wet shirt clinging to his broad shoulders, his breeches tightly fitted around his calves and thighs.

"You are the captain?" she asked with a quirked brow to the man she had saved.

"I am." His voice, no longer muted by howling wind and waves, was deep and rich. "Captain Gavin Kendricks of the HMS *Valour*."

The captain himself had been the one to jump from his ship in order to rescue his lieutenant? Abigail attempted a look of indifference. She could not show how impressed she truly was with the man's boldness. Not while she was still upset about his mistaking her for a boy.

She turned toward the other sailors on the beach. "How many of your men have perished?"

"Have we a number, Lieutenant Johnson?" the captain asked, coming up to stand beside her.

She became acutely aware of their proximity and took a sidestep away from him.

Another officer standing nearby answered Captain Kendricks. "We have sixteen men so far unaccounted for, sir."

Sixteen. It was a relatively small number, compared to how many men must have been aboard the ship—no doubt more than two hundred. Even still, the number eddied in Abigail's mind. Golowduyn could have saved them, so why had it not? Was it her fault, or was it the captain's?

She glanced toward him. His shoulders had visibly fallen, the lanterns revealing his gaunt expression. Some of the captains she had encountered had not even bothered to feign sorrow at the news of their crew members' deaths.

To his credit, Captain Kendricks look genuinely distressed. Her distaste for the captain slightly eased.

"St. Just lies east of here," she said, the heaviness of the loss still hovering around them. "You may find lodging there that should satisfy your needs for shelter for the night."

She scanned the sailors farther up the beach, her eyes falling upon a man in shackles sitting down in the sand and guarded by two broad-shouldered men. She wondered what he had done to be secured in such a way. "Golowduyn is small, Captain, but we can accommodate the worst of your wounded until they are well enough to travel themselves."

"I must thank you and your husband for your generosity, Mrs. Moore," the captain said.

"Oh, I'm not…" She looked away. What did it matter if she corrected him? She would have no need to speak with him again. "You may have your surgeon send the wounded up directly. I will make ready for them."

"Thank you, Mrs. Moore."

She blushed but remained silent at the misnomer. Giving a simple nod, she walked away without a glance back, though she felt his eyes on her until she disappeared into the darkness.

Abigail had planned to get straight to work the moment she

reached the lighthouse. But when her uncle was nowhere to be found, she knew he must have gone to the lamp room. If he had even made it up the stairs, that is.

She rang the bell at the bottom of the staircase to alert him of her arrival, setting aside her frustrations. She knew Uncle Ellis would need help coming down, but her duty to the sailors was not yet complete.

After changing into a simple, but dry, work dress, she went about gathering rags, pushing aside furniture, and setting up spare cots with blankets.

Just as she finished seeing to a large fire in the sitting room hearth, a knock sounded at the door. She allowed the men inside, and soon, the room was filled with the low murmur of sailors' voices as they tended to their wounded mates.

Mr. Lee, the ship's surgeon, accepted Abigail's offer of help. She kept busy, applying bandages and keeping up a steady supply of rags and boiled water.

They tended to Lieutenant Harris's wounds first before moving to a scowling young man, no more than seventeen.

"I know you're angry, Myles," Mr. Lee said as he cleaned the large gash on the boy's forehead, "but there is no need to be upset with the captain. Not after he's saved so many of us, including your brother."

Abigail's ears perked at the mention of their commanding officer, but before she could hear the young man's response, a grunt sounded down the hallway.

She excused herself from Mr. Lee and ran to her uncle's aid in the circular room. She found him leaning heavily upon the spiral railing, the other hand on his cane.

"Uncle!" She rushed to his side, raising his arm around her shoulders and helping him down the remaining steps. "You should not have been up there."

Beads of sweat trembled on his brow. "We both did what was necessary."

"You could have watched the light from the sitting room, though, as I said earlier."

He spoke between heavy breaths. "If the lamps would have gone out, I would never have been able to make it in time to relight them. Not before another ship passed by, at any rate. I am just glad I was finally able to be of some use."

Abigail held her tongue. Uncle Ellis may have behaved foolishly, but she knew his fall had not only caused injury to his knees, but to his pride, as well.

They crossed the room, and he winced.

"Well, you will certainly suffer the consequences of the climb come morning," she said, "but thank you for your help. The storm has

lessened some, so you needn't return upstairs. I will refill the lamps when the others have gone."

"How many are wounded?"

They reached the sitting room, standing in the doorway and peering within at the sailors. Uncle Ellis removed his arm from around her.

"Fifty or so," she replied, "but most of them remained on the beach. Only nine of them were worse enough to require shelter here. There were very few casualties, as well, compared to what we have seen before."

"They must have a good captain then."

Abigail thought of Captain Kendricks, of his gaze fixated on her—and of his mistaking her for a boy. "I suppose."

Three raps sounded against the front door, and she moved to open the call. "Sit by the fire, Uncle. I'll bring you a cup of tea in a moment."

She opened the door. Light from behind her poured outside and illuminated the handsome face of the captain.

Her stomach did a strange turn. "Captain Kendricks, do come in. Your men are just through here." She pulled the door open wider, allowing him passage.

"Thank you, Mrs. Moore."

Yes, it was certainly too late to correct him now. "Of course. You will find—"

"Abigail?"

She and the captain faced Uncle Ellis as he joined them in the hallway.

"Uncle," she said, "allow me to introduce Captain Kendricks. Captain, my uncle—"

"Kendricks?" Uncle Ellis interrupted. His eyes narrowed, and he leaned closer. "Gavin Kendricks?"

Abigail glanced between them. Her look of bewilderment matched the captain's until recognition dawned in his eyes.

"Ellis Moore?" he said. "I never thought I would see you again."

Abigail's surprise grew as the gentlemen embraced.

With the captain's back turned toward her, she noticed for the first time the dark red blood on the back of his upper left arm as it hung limply at his side. The wound had to be as large and painful as the stain suggested. Why had he not come up straightaway with the others who were injured?

"How have you been, sir?" Captain Kendricks asked as the men pulled apart.

Abigail had to take a step to the side to avoid being tread upon. She crossed her arms with an impatient sigh.

“Very fine, indeed,” Uncle Ellis responded. “Living a life of peace.”

“So it would appear,” the captain said.

Abigail took another step to the side, tapping her boot on the floor. Still, she remained unnoticed and in the dark as to how they knew each other.

“I have seen your name listed with other keepers before,” Captain Kendricks continued. “I do not know how I’ve managed to overlook the fact that it was you. Especially as I heard you funded your own lighthouse years ago. I never believed that to be true until now.”

Uncle Ellis chuckled. “Yes, it is true enough. As mad an ambition as it was, I have never regretted it. This lighthouse truly is my life.”

Abigail narrowed her eyes at her uncle. It had been some time since she had heard him speak in such a way.

Only then did she take note of the change in his blue eyes. They were shining brighter than they had in months.

A frown puckered her brow.

“And what about you?” Uncle Ellis asked. “Captain of your own ship? Your parents must be very proud.”

A moment passed by before the captain responded, his voice softer than before. “I thought you would have heard. They both passed away ten years ago.”

Uncle Ellis’s face twisted with grief, and Abigail forgot her irritation at being ignored. “No, I had not heard. My dear boy, I am so sorry. I fear I lost touch with your father after I came to Cornwall. They were the best of people, your parents.”

“I am inclined to agree with you, sir.”

Silence hung in the air between them, and finally, Uncle Ellis’s attention fell on Abigail.

“Oh, forgive me, my dear.” He beckoned her closer. “You recall me speaking of Mr. Kendricks, my friend from Gloucestershire? This is his son.”

Abigail sidled past the captain in the narrow hallway to stand next to her uncle. She recalled Uncle Ellis mentioning the name once or twice. The two gentlemen had gone to school together, and when Mr. Kendricks had grown and married, Uncle Ellis had set forth to explore England.

“Captain Kendricks,” her uncle continued, “this is my niece, Miss Abigail Moore.”

So, she was *Miss* Moore, then. He eyed her auburn hair twisted into a chignon. Wavy tendrils—still moist from the rain outside—framed her face in a disorderly manner. He could finally appreciate her without that cap on her head, and in the warm candlelight of her

home.

Now the proper accent she spoke with made perfect sense. She was the niece of a gentleman, no doubt the daughter of a gentleman.

"It is a pleasure, Miss Moore," he said with a bow.

The woman bobbed a curtsy in silence. She stared at the floor. She still could not be upset about his mistaking her for a boy, could she?

Gavin glanced to her uncle, still reeling at seeing his father's old friend. "I must tell you, Mr. Moore, we are indebted to your niece. Not only did she guide my men safely to shore by her light, but she also rescued me and my first lieutenant from drowning in the sea."

Gavin expected her to be flattered by his praise, but he was instead treated to a look of irritation.

Blue. Her eyes were blue and framed with dark lashes—and appeared rather menacing as she scowled up at him. But, why *did* she scowl?

Gavin finally understood when her uncle whirled toward her, nostrils flared.

"Abigail Moore, what were you thinking?"

"Uncle, I assure you, I took care." The woman shot a threatening glance at Gavin, as if to warn him to keep his mouth shut about how perilous the waters truly had been. "I merely set forth upon the sea, retrieved the captain and his mate, and returned to shore."

"I've told you before," Mr. Moore said, "I do not like you to do this. Suppose the wind had changed, or a wave had driven you straight into the rocks?"

"It didn't, Uncle. As I said—"

"If I may interject…" Gavin said.

They turned toward him. He knew he might be overstepping his bounds, but he had to say something.

After all, he was the reason the woman had ventured forth on the sea in the first place.

"Mr. Moore," he began, "I fully understand your concern over your niece's decision. However, I must say that I owe her my life. If she had not reacted so selflessly and courageously, I would not be standing before you now."

Mr. Moore scratched at his chin. "I suppose I cannot be too angry then. Abigail, I trust you will exercise more sense in the future?"

Her lips thinned. "Of course, Uncle. So long as the next captain exercises more sense than to crash his ship beneath a lighthouse."

Abigail regretted the words the moment she said them. Yes, she was upset that the captain had ousted her boat excursion to her uncle, and that he had thought she was a boy. But she was more distressed with Uncle Ellis's reaction to Captain Kendricks's presence. There was

a time when *she* had been the one to convince her uncle to change his mind so readily, to get him to speak enthusiastically. And now this captain—this near stranger—had that effect when she did not? How could that be so?

Still, her insecurities were not the captain's fault. She knew she ought to treat the man with more kindness.

"You are wounded, sir," she said, speaking to the captain and motioning to the sitting room. "You must allow your surgeon to look after you. Mr. Lee?" She waited for the man to join them in the hallway. "Captain Kendricks has a wound at the back of his left arm."

Mr. Lee moved behind the captain with squinted eyes. "I'll see to it directly, sir."

"No, care for the others first," the captain said.

Abigail glanced into the sitting room. Two of the men remained unbandaged. "I can do more than gather clean rags, Mr. Lee. Allow me to cleanse the wounds of the remaining sailors while you see to the captain."

But Mr. Lee shook his head. "No, miss. This is sordid business. A great deal of blood. I shouldn't like you to grow faint."

Her pride prickled. "I am perfectly able to remain upright at the sight of blood, sir. I assure you."

"It is true enough," Uncle Ellis chimed in. "My niece has helped clean wounds on many sailors. She is more than capable."

Abigail raised her chin and stared pointedly at Mr. Lee, but the man still looked uncertain.

"Well, I, for one, do not need further convincing." All eyes fell upon the captain as he took a step forward. "Miss Moore may look after my wound until you are finished with the others, Mr. Lee."

Abigail's stomach became a mess of jumbled nerves. She had intended to offer her help with the other sailors, not the captain and the broad shoulders she was trying very hard not to notice.

Mr. Lee lowered his voice, leaning in toward his captain with a wary glance at Abigail. "I really think I ought to be the one who tends to your wound, Captain."

Abigail pulled a face. She was really starting to dislike this surgeon.

"I should like the other men to be seen first," Captain Kendricks said. "I trust Miss Moore. After all, she has already saved me once this evening. I'm certain she will treat me with the utmost care again. Will you not, Miss Moore?"

The candlelight flickered in his dark brown eyes. To be perfectly honest, she was not entirely certain she *could* help the captain with his wound. Her hands seemed to tremble at the mere thought of touching him. But as Mr. Lee regarded her dubiously, she raised her chin. "Yes,

I will."

The surgeon plodded back to the sitting room, and Abigail tried not to appear too smug. Her vanity disappeared, however, when she noted the captain's eyes still upon her.

"Why don't you situate yourself in the dining room, Captain?" she said, motioning to the room across the hall to distract him.

"Yes, there will be more room in there," her uncle agreed. "I should like to continue our conversation, Captain, but I think I ought to lie down for a moment."

His hand quivered as he leaned his weight on his cane, and Abigail chided her lack of consideration. "Allow me to help you, Uncle."

"No, you can see to the captain."

They watched him walk away, using both the wall and his cane for support before she gestured again for the captain to go to dining room.

As he entered the room, Abigail gathered a few rags and retrieved a thin blade from Mr. Lee—the surgeon handing it over with a begrudging look. After she poured a bowl of hot water from the pot warming over the kitchen fire, she entered the dining room. She found Captain Kendricks attempting to remove his shirt, his waistcoat and cravat already draped over the back of a chair.

She set her supplies on the table just as his left arm dropped to his side, a groan of pain and frustration escaping his lips.

"Would you like me to help you?" she offered.

"I would be grateful. Thank you."

Abigail walked toward him and tugged first at the wet fabric of his right sleeve. He wiggled his arm free after a few stifled grunts. She moved around him, lifting his shirt up and over his head before holding the fabric away from his wound. As she did so, her fingers grazed his back, and she pulled back with a start.

He peered over his shoulder. "What is it?"

"Your wound," she lied. "It is deeper than I thought it would be."

She lowered her hand, wiggling her fingers to remove the tingling sensation his skin had caused. Careful not to touch him again, she raised the fabric past the injury and down his left arm.

"How did you acquire the wound, Captain?" she asked, desperate to distract herself from his bare, muscular back.

"It is as you said. I did not use any sense and led my ship to crash upon the cliffs."

Abigail ducked her head, hiding her blush as she stepped around him. "I should not have said that before. I only did so because you told my uncle I was out in the boat."

She crossed the room and draped his wet shirt over the back of a

chair near the fire.

"In my defense," he said behind her, "I didn't know you wished that information to remain undisclosed."

She turned to see him rolling out his arm with a wince, and her breath caught in her throat. The intimacy of the situation again struck her as she stood alone with the half-clothed man in her home.

What was the matter with her? She had seen plenty of sailors in the same state of undress as she had tended to their wounds. Apart from the captain's impressive physique, attractive features, and warm, brown eyes that always seemed to be studying her, why should this man affect her any differently?

"If you take a seat, we may begin," she said, waving one hand toward the table as she focused on her supplies.

His chair creaked as he sat down sideways, his back facing her.

Thankfully, the sight of his wound soon distracted her from the muscles working in his back and arms as he shifted.

Well, it almost distracted her.

She sat behind him, allowing the firelight to shine on his wound. The injury was deep, a jagged circle open on the back of his arm. Dark blood caked the surrounding skin, and small pieces of wood lodged far into his flesh.

As a young girl, during the first shipwreck Abigail had ever witnessed at Golowduyn, the sight of such mutilation had made her nearly faint. But after years of practice—and refusing to allow herself to dwell too much on what she was doing—she had grown accustomed to tending to such wounds.

She leaned in close to the captain's back and began her efforts, intent on finishing so Mr. Lee could find nothing of which to complain. She slid a finger down the side of his wound to see how easily the blood would wash off, ignoring the feeling it produced on her skin again. This was work, after all, and she would treat it as such.

"Are you cold, sir?" she asked when she noted the chills upon his flesh.

He cleared his throat. "No, indeed."

She eyed the back of his head curiously before submerging a rag in the hot water. "I will do my best to take care, Captain. But this may hurt."

Her fingers burned with the heat of the water as she squeezed the rag over his wound. His muscles twitched in protest, but he made no further movement.

"You are certain you are all right doing this?" he asked.

Abigail tore her gaze away from the droplets sliding down the ridges of his arm. She used her free hand to press a dry cloth beneath the wound to catch the excess blood and moisture. "I have already

said that I am."

"I only ask because I do not wish to cause you any discomfort." He spoke with his head turned to the window, light from the fireplace dancing on his profile. "Most ladies would shy away from the tasks you have taken part of this evening."

She wiped away the remaining blood around the wound and dropped the rag in the bowl. "I suppose I am not like most ladies, then."

She cringed at the word. She did not consider herself a lady any more than she considered herself a boy. She was a female lighthouse keeper. And that was enough.

Slow footsteps slid across the floor near the doorway, and she looked up to see the wounded lieutenant from the boat appear before them. His arm was in a sling and his face was void of color.

Abigail went straight to his side, holding his good arm and leading him toward the nearest chair. "You must sit before you fall over, sir."

He settled in his seat. "Do I know you, miss?"

"Miss Moore is the woman who saved us," Captain Kendricks explained as she resumed her place behind him. "Miss Moore, this is Lieutenant Harris."

"Woman? But I thought a…"

Abigail's head was down, but she did not miss the subtle shake of the captain's head toward Lieutenant Harris, clearly warning him to end his words.

"Well, we are indebted to you, miss," the lieutenant finished.

Abigail retrieved the surgeon's knife from the table. She decided to ignore the two men until they could learn to recognize a woman when they saw one.

With the tip of her knife, she fished out the first splinter near the edge of the cut. The captain flinched.

"We truly are fortunate to be alive," he said after a slow release of breath. "You made a remarkably selfless choice to have risked your life in such a way, Miss Moore."

Abigail focused on a particularly stubborn splinter in his back, willing the red in her cheeks to fade away. "It is simply my duty to help the sailors whom our light has failed."

Captain Kendricks glanced over his shoulder. "Your light did not fail the *Valour*."

"If that is true, Captain, then how did you come upon the rocks of Dulatha Cliffs?"

He glanced to Lieutenant Harris, who appeared even paler than before.

"Because," the captain began, "we believe a revolt occurred with

a small number aboard the ship tonight."

"A mutiny?" she questioned.

Both men looked to the door with anxious glances before sharing a look of their own.

Abigail's irritation grew. She knew what happened aboard their ship was none of her concern. But to be left out of yet another conversation—as she had been with her uncle and Captain Kendricks earlier—grated on her nerves.

"If you do not wish for me to know anything further," she said, "I suggest waiting until I am finished with your wound to continue speaking on the matter."

She picked at another splinter, but Captain Kendricks's low voice made her pause.

"No, it is not that, Miss Moore. This delicate matter involves a member of our crew who is wounded in the next room."

Her cheeks burned again. "Oh, I see."

"I would not have allowed him up here, but we do not want him to know we suspect him," the captain explained, "as he might attempt to run."

Abigail mentally sifted through the sailors she had tended to that night before settling on the angry young man the surgeon had spoken to about Captain Kendricks. "The boy with the wounded brow? Mr. Lee said he was angry with you."

The captain lowered his voice to a whisper. "Myles, yes. His elder brother, Sanders, threatened me while aboard the *Valour*."

"And," Lieutenant Harris added, "we believe the brothers worked together to start a fire below deck."

"What is to become of them both?" Abigail asked, becoming so engrossed in the tale, she nearly forgot to wipe away the blood trickling down Captain Kendricks's arm.

"There will be a court martial, but—"

"Lieutenant Harris, I told you to remain on the cot." Mr. Lee appeared in the doorway, his eyebrows so thick they were nearly one.

The lieutenant raised an innocent brow. "The captain wished to speak with me, sir. You know I always obey Captain's orders."

He sent a teasing wink at Abigail, but his smirk vanished as he stood, swaying from side to side until Mr. Lee steadied him.

"You see?" Mr. Lee said. "You cannot have recovered already." He led the man from the room and spoke over his shoulder. "Captain, I will return shortly to see how the miss fared."

Abigail frowned at the empty doorway.

"Now is your chance to make quick work, Miss Moore," Captain Kendricks said when they were alone. "Prove the man is wrong to doubt you."

With his encouragement, Abigail moved faster, if only slightly, for she did not wish to cause the captain more pain than he had to have already been feeling.

Finally, the last of the splinters were removed, and Mr. Lee returned to scrutinize her work. To her great satisfaction, he appeared rather annoyed. “Thank you, miss,” he grumbled.

She sauntered away with a raised chin, looking back over her shoulder only long enough to see the captain’s look of approval before she left the room.

Before long, Mr. Lee finished suturing and bandaging the wounded, and the able men prepared to leave with their captain. Only the lieutenant and one other sailor would remain overnight in the warmth of the lighthouse with Mr. Lee to watch over them. The rest would seek shelter in St. Just and other nearby towns.

As they filed out of Golowduyn, Abigail stood in the doorway, nodding to each sailor who tipped his cap at her in departure.

Captain Kendricks stood at the back, adjusting his slightly dried shirt over his bandaged arm. Myles Sanders, the angry young man, simply stomped past her without so much as a glance, but a sailor who appeared close to her age lingered at her side.

“Miss,” he began, “I never seen a prettier girl than ye. What do ye do all night as ye watch this lighthouse?”

“I watch the lighthouse,” she stated, unimpressed.

“Ye must tire of bein’ alone. If ever ye yearn for company, might I suggest meself?”

“No, you may not.”

The man reached for her hand with his bandaged fingers. “Come now, miss. I’ll show ye a fine—”

“Bradie!”

At his captain’s reprimand, the young sailor ducked his head and slunk away from Abigail’s side. The other sailors chortled as he joined them.

“I do apologize, Miss Moore,” Captain Kendricks said, coming up to stand beside her. “I fear the drink he was given for his pain has weakened his good sense.”

“It has happened before,” she said, eying the men as they made their way through the darkness and falling rain. “Especially when they have the sense to realize that I am, in fact, a woman.”

She stared at him pointedly, but he did not squirm as she had expected him to. Instead, his eyes shone brighter.

“I assure you, Miss Moore,” he said, “had I seen your face before your cap, there is no possible way I would have ever mistaken you for a boy.”

He walked away to join his men, and Abigail stared after him, the

corners of her lips tugging upwards until he vanished in the darkness.

Chapter Three

By dawn, the storm had passed. The calm waves reflected the soft pink clouds above, and the sparrows' shrill chirps sounded once again.

Abigail stood near the edge of the cliff, breathing in the earthy smell of the damp grass as she eyed the beach. The sand was littered with debris. A few sailors had returned that morning to filter through the wreckage, no doubt looking for any of their belongings that might be salvageable. She scanned the men, telling herself she was looking for no one in particular.

"Quite the mess, is it not?"

Abigail turned to see her uncle coming up behind her. "The ship is clearly beyond saving," she said, "but at least most of the men are safe." She tilted her head to one side. "Why are you awake so early, Uncle?"

"I couldn't sleep after the last of the sailors left this morning," he said, leaning both hands on his cane in front of him. "I stayed awake to update the logbooks. The one thing I am still capable of doing."

"How are your knees after last night?" she asked. She knew better than to dwell on his gloomy words.

"Sorer than usual."

She looped her arm through his and rested her head on his shoulder, hoping to provide a little comfort to his downtrodden spirit. "Perhaps you might consider walking to Mr. Craig's today for a tincture. You always cheer up after your visits with him."

Mr. Craig, the town apothecary, often provided her uncle with pain relief for his knees. The two had become easy friends over the past few months, their visits usually lasting until the early hours of the morning.

Abigail knew the friendship helped Uncle Ellis to forget about his current situation. Though she felt, at times, that her uncle was forgetting her in the process, too, she still encouraged their visits to help improve her uncle's mood.

“Perhaps another day,” Uncle Ellis said. He turned to the sailors on the beach below. “I thought to invite Captain Kendricks to join us for dinner this evening.”

“Oh?” She tried to appear as apathetic as possible.

“I was going to look for him on the beach this morning, but…” He stared down at his cane with clear aversion.

“Allow me to help then,” Abigail offered. “I will be ready just as soon as I extinguish the lamps.”

Uncle Ellis expressed his gratitude, but she waved it aside. After all, she could not have passed on the opportunity to ease her uncle’s burden, no matter how many chores she was setting aside to do so.

And if she just so happened to see the captain of the HMS *Valour* again, too, then that would be fine, as well.

“Have any more bodies washed ashore, Lieutenant Johnson?” Gavin asked.

“Yes, sir, two,” the second lieutenant replied.

Two. And three others found just before dawn. That brought the death toll to twenty-one. Twenty-one men Gavin had failed to protect.

He knew the amount was minor compared to other shipwrecks—and to the number of men who had perished due to battles and illnesses aboard the *Valour*. But those who had died the previous night, they had been so close to home, so close to completing their voyage.

And now, Gavin would sign twenty-one letters for the families of those brothers and sons, fathers and uncles, who had served their country but would never return home.

“Continue the search along this beach and others, Lieutenant,” Gavin instructed as the knot in his stomach tightened. “As far as Tregalwen, if needs be. I need the total number of deaths listed before we make for Penzance tomorrow.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And send Bradie to keep a watch on Myles,” Gavin said, lowering his voice. “At least until we are certain he won’t be charged with his brother. He’s not likely to leave until the ship has been paid off, anyway, but I should like to ensure he does nothing else reckless while he’s still under my command.”

Lieutenant Johnson nodded before walking away.

Gavin rubbed the back of his neck, returning his attention to the wreckage of his ship.

His concern for the fate of the *Valour* had passed the night before when he’d watched the simmering fire and gusts of wind eventually cause the foremast to fall. Since then, his worries had centered on the men he had lost—and the Sanders brothers who were the cause of it

all.

An immovable weight pressed down on his chest—a weight he vowed he would never feel again. Yes, the time had come to request his official retirement from the navy. The actions of the Sanders had prompted the idea—and the wrecking of the *Valour* had settled it. All he needed to do now was find something that would bring him more fulfillment than he'd ever experienced as a captain in the navy.

Such a task couldn't be too difficult. Could it?

"Hello there, Captain!"

Gavin looked over his shoulder to see Ellis Moore walking along the beach toward him, his niece by his side in a simple, dark brown dress.

She looked to be about three and twenty, though the light freckles spattering her nose and upper cheeks gave her a youthful air. He had already noticed the color of her hair before in the low light of their home, but in the sunshine, her auburn locks glinted a deeper red.

"Good morning," he greeted, walking up to meet them.

Mr. Moore leaned heavily upon his niece, and Gavin wondered how she managed to remain upright, being a full head shorter and a great deal thinner than her uncle.

"How fares your wound, Captain?" Mr. Moore asked.

"Much better after the careful attention of your niece, sir," Gavin said. He noticed the slightest hint of pink crossing Miss Moore's cheeks. "And I am in far better shape than most of my men, so for that I am grateful."

"Rightly so. The ship doesn't look very good, either."

Gavin stepped aside to face the wreckage. "No, she's beyond repairing. We will salvage what little we can, and watch for any belongings to be washed ashore, but any hope of the *Valour* sailing again was washed away in the storm last evening."

"Shame, that," Mr. Moore said.

Gavin noted Miss Moore's silence, but when he looked toward her, her eyes darted away.

"So how long do you plan to stay then, Captain?" Mr. Moore asked.

Gavin reluctantly drew his gaze away from the woman. "I will make for Penzance tomorrow when the ship is paid off, then return to St. Just to oversee the salvaging for a few days."

"In that case, you must stay with us at Golowduyn."

Abigail blinked several times to keep her eyes from rounding in surprise. Captain Kendricks, stay with them? What was her uncle thinking? They hardly had room for each other, let alone another man.

“Thank you,” the captain said with a sincere look of gratitude, “but I couldn’t. I will need to return to Penzance a time or two in the coming weeks. It is nearly a two-hour ride, so it would be better if I stayed there.”

Abigail’s relief was short-lived as her uncle pressed on.

“Oh, please,” he said. “You will be far more comfortable staying with us than you would at The Golden Arms or any other inn in Penzance. And my niece is a wonderful cook, especially compared with what you would eat elsewhere.”

Her uncle had obviously forgotten that her cooking was dependent on them actually having funds for food in the first place. What was she to feed him, a crust of bread? A fried egg? That would hardly be sufficient for a man of the captain’s stature.

“You would really be doing me a favor,” Uncle Ellis continued. “I spend many evenings alone while Abigail tends to the lights. I would love to have a companion to speak with again.”

Abigail bowed her head. Her uncle’s words stung. She knew he had not meant to offend her, just as she knew their duty was to see to the lighthouse before all else. Even still, she had constantly attempted to engage her uncle in conversation. Had he truly not noticed her efforts? Or was Captain Kendricks simply better company than Abigail could ever be?

A strange jealousy pricked her heart. “Captain Kendricks has already responded, Uncle. You should not press him.”

She caught the captain’s eyes on her. “Yes, and I could not impose.”

“You would be no imposition at all. Tell him, Abigail. Don’t you wish for him to stay with us?”

Abigail’s cheeks burned red. How could she answer such a question? She considered speaking the truth for a single, brief, moment—that Captain Kendricks *would* be an imposition on their income, their space, their time—but after one subtle, firm look from her uncle, she bit her tongue.

“Your staying with us would be no imposition at all, Captain,” she said. “We would be delighted to have you.”

“There, you see?” Uncle Ellis said.

Finally, Captain Kendricks relented. “Very well. I accept your offer with gratitude. I expect to return from Penzance in a day or two, and then I should be glad to stay with you.”

“Excellent,” Uncle Ellis said.

“Now, if you will excuse me, I must see to my men.” The captain bowed, his eyes lingering on Abigail before he turned and walked away.

Abigail stared after him. She ought to be angry that he was

upsetting her life, her routine. But after one brown-eyed stare in her direction, she was looking forward to the captain's stay more than she cared to admit.

And she was sorely confused because of it.

* * *

Two days after the shipwreck, Gavin sat in the tavern in St. Just, wondering if the meat on his plate was truly fish or if the cook had simply replaced it with a slab of something molded from old bread. His lips pulled down with disgust, and he pushed aside the uneaten food.

It was just as well. He would be at the lighthouse soon for dinner. He hadn't eaten all day, but he could wait, especially if that meant not becoming ill by eating whatever had been placed before him.

At any rate, he was not at the tavern to eat.

He leaned forward, resting his arms on the table and ignoring the ache in his wound. The room was dark, lit only by a few small windows to one side of the establishment. Gray smoke from pipes lingered in the air around the occupied tables, and a large fire crackled at the side of the room.

Hidden behind the bar counter, Gavin silently watched Myles Sanders across the crowded room. The young man sat with cards in one hand and a drink in the other. His blond hair was tied at the nape of his neck, though most of it hung in strings around his face. His sunken eyes were framed in a grayish purple—evidence of sleepless nights and hours spent in the dark room gambling.

Gavin had not expected to see the boy again after leaving Penzance. The ship had been paid off, the crew having received pay for their time aboard the *Valour*, so why had Myles returned to St. Just? It was not a port town, and the boy's only family was his elder brother, who was still imprisoned, awaiting a court martial in Penzance.

Now that a few days had passed since the shipwreck, Gavin's anger had slowly dissipated toward the boy, replaced instead with pity. After all, Sanders was the one behind the destruction, Gavin was sure of it. Myles was merely a pawn.

In truth, Gavin wondered if the attempted mutiny might have been prevented altogether had he assigned an officer to watch over Myles from the start of their journey, providing the boy with a better example than that of his corruptive brother.

But it was too late now.

Sanders would soon receive a guilty sentence, and Myles would be left to fend for himself.

At the thought, a strange sense of responsibility settled on Gavin.

Surely something could be done for the boy, to help him in some regard.

But as Myles slid two cards face down across the table, his sunken eyes darting to the other men around him, Gavin knew the truth. Myles Sanders would not accept help from anyone—least of all the man responsible for the capture of his only brother.

"How was Penzance, Captain?" Lieutenant Harris asked. He approached Gavin with a drink in his hand. "Are you a free man?"

"It would appear so," Gavin responded. He motioned to the seat across from him, and Harris sat down. "I was astonished the Admiralty pardoned me so quickly."

"That is because you were not at fault for the shipwreck, sir."

As captain, Gavin had to answer for the destruction of the *Valour*. Thankfully, a few of his men had been present to speak up for him before the Admiralty, and since his own reputation was untarnished, Gavin was proven blameless in the disaster.

Though, was he truly blameless if he could have done more to prevent it?

As Harris took a drink from his cup, Gavin's eyes wandered again to Myles as the boy ran trembling fingers through his greasy hair.

"A local farmer has hired a few men from the *Valour*, Myles being one of them," Lieutenant Harris said, lowering his voice and motioning across the room with a toss of his head.

So Myles had come back to St. Just to earn funds. Of course. Since he would not be returning to the sea without his brother—and had no other family to help him—the boy would need some way to provide himself with a living.

Unless, of course, he gambled all of it away first.

Shouts echoed throughout the tavern. Two men stood from Myles' table, both accusing the other of cheating. A large man with black hair that stretched across the length of his arms reached for both men and dragged them straight out of the pub by their collars. A few men cheered, but Myles remained seated, silently staring at the cards strewn across the table.

"He will end up in the same place as his brother if he carries on in here," Gavin said as the commotion ended.

"What is the latest regarding Sanders?" Harris asked.

Gavin glanced sidelong at the boy as more cards were dealt across the table. "The court martial will take place in a week or two. But I have heard that Sanders will assume full responsibility for tampering with the anchor cables and starting the fire."

"Even though he could not have done either while shackled?" Harris questioned.

Gavin shrugged a shoulder. "I suppose his conscience has finally

appeared and he wishes to protect his brother. His sentence will surely be death. But Myles won't be charged."

"Can anything be done for the boy, to ensure a better life for him?"

"I'm certain any attempt to help will be used as kindling to an already blazing fire," Gavin responded.

More shouting came from across the room. Myles flew off his chair, knocking it to the ground as he spewed a string of curses at the men seated around him. He threw his cards onto the table, gulped down the last of his drink, and tossed the empty cup to the floor before bolting toward the door.

The boy's red face and blue veins pulsing in his neck stung Gavin's conscience. There really was nothing to be done for him.

A feeling of despair rested on Gavin's shoulders, but he ignored it. He would no longer be brought down by the boy. At least, not in that moment.

"So, Lieutenant Harris, what are you to do while you are on approved leave?"

Harris touched his sling with his opposite hand. "I will stay in St. Just until I am fit for travel, I suppose. Then I'll make for Penzance and remain until I'm fully healed and ready to join another ship."

"Not to your mother's then?"

Harris scoffed. "I hardly think that would be wise, seeing as how she was the one who first pushed me into the navy."

Gavin chuckled. He'd heard many tales of Harris's youth filled with wild and reckless behavior. He could almost see a glimpse of him as a boy when Harris had occasionally disobeyed Gavin's orders, though only when it was for the good of another. Harris had proven a most reliable sailor and friend for Gavin over the five years they had served together.

"What of your own plans, sir?" Harris asked.

Gavin hesitated. He hadn't told anyone yet. It was so recent, he'd hardly had time to acknowledge it himself.

"Well," he began, "I must be honest with you, Harris. I have submitted my request to retire from the navy."

Harris pulled back with widened eyes. "Sir, I had no idea you were even considering retirement."

"I've been thinking about doing so for quite some time, but the shipwreck solidified my desires. I feel that something…well, that something is missing from my life. Something that cannot be filled by the sea, I'm afraid."

Harris nodded, his green eyes suddenly shining. "I see. So are you to return to your brother's then to find that 'something' you are missing? Oh, no, that is right. You are staying with the Moores at the

lighthouse."

Gavin rubbed his jaw, ignoring his friend's knowing look. "You heard about that, did you?"

"The whole crew did, sir. I must say, all of us have been rather envious you get to spend more time with the woman of the lighthouse." He paused. "I tell you, I was startled to discover she was the one to have rescued us. Though, I did think she had a rather feminine face for a boy." He chuckled. "I do hope you will enjoy yourself there, sir. And find what you are in search of, even it is just a little rest. You deserve it."

Gavin's face fell. Rest? Such a notion did not appeal to him in the slightest. He enjoyed freedom as much as the next man, but he far preferred a life of good, honest work to living tediously, accomplishing nothing and helping no one.

His musings continued after he bade farewell to Harris and left St. Just on his newly-purchased horse, heading toward the sea.

He wondered what his life *would* be like now. He had loved serving in the navy when he was younger. Nothing compared to being at the mercy of the powerful water—the spray of the sea across the ship, the smell in the air. But he would not miss the stress he was constantly under to keep his men safe.

Yes, it was time for a change, for a more rewarding life.

But where could he find such a life? Surely not at his brother's home, surrounded by land, the latest fashions, and women wishing to wed Gavin now that he had made a name for himself.

He grimaced. He did not wish for any of those things.

Setting aside his uncertainty for his future, he focused instead on his surroundings.

He had been to Cornwall before but never at his leisure. As he rode over the cliffs, he found a growing appreciation for the beauty of the county. The green countryside was broken up by wild grass and gray tors. Bees hummed above the yellow gorse near the cliff's edge, and the ocean sparkled behind the flowers in the early evening sunlight.

In the distance, Golowduyn Lighthouse came into view. The light brown building backed up onto the cliffside behind it, creating a rather quaint sight. The paint was chipped, the roof was badly in need of repair, and cracks were in nearly every window of the small home, but Gavin couldn't deny the charming allure of the structure.

He still felt guilty for accepting Mr. Moore's offer to stay, especially when Miss Moore had been pressed to agree. He could only guess they had very little room and finances to spare. As such, he was determined to not be a further burden to her. He would help her in any way he could.

And as he thought of helping Miss Moore—as she had helped him—his future did not seem so very bleak.

At least, not for the duration of his stay at the lighthouse with Mr. Moore and his niece.

Abigail tossed another forkful of manure into the wheelbarrow behind her.

Brilliant sunshine seeped through the cracks of the stables' wooden walls, highlighting the particles of hay that floated around her, shimmering in the light. A breeze flowed in through the open doors, bringing with it the sound of the waves below.

She could almost imagine she was walking on the beach, the sand soft against her bare feet, the water licking her legs. But as the scent of manure drifted beneath her nose, reality settled in once more.

It was just as well. She could not dawdle if she was going to finish cleaning out the stall before the captain arrived with the new horse he had said he would purchase.

He had brought up his trunk to the house—most of the contents remarkably undamaged, despite being tossed upon the sea—before he'd left for Penzance, promising to return in two days' time.

Abigail had worked continuously since then in preparation for his stay—cleaning the sitting room, purchasing food they could not afford, and moving her uncle's belongings to the study, so Captain Kendricks might have the bigger room as his own. On top of all that, she had still managed to look after the light, though the stables and a few of her other chores had been neglected.

She placed another pile of soiled hay into the wheelbarrow just as a horse's knicker sounded from outside of the stables. With her own horse in the stall next to her, she knew the captain must have arrived.

The last thing she wanted was for him to see her engaged in such a task. Not wishing to explore the reasons why she wanted to portray herself as more proper than she was, Abigail contemplated running out the back door, or perhaps ducking behind the stall. But when she saw his long shadow appear down the center of the stables, she knew she was too late.

"Good evening, Captain," she greeted as she heard him pause in the doorway. She didn't look up at him. She could not bear to see what she knew would be disgust written on his face.

"Miss Moore, what are you doing?"

She scooped up a pile of manure. "I should think that rather obvious, sir."

"No, I know what you are doing. I mean, why are you doing it?"

"Because I do not think our horses would appreciate standing in their own filth."

“But surely *you* should not have to complete the task.”

She paused, pressing a hand against her aching lower back as she looked toward him. He stood tall and stately in the small doorway. The golden light shone at the edges of his blue captain’s jacket. His masculine features were as appealing as ever. Goodness, but he was handsome.

She pulled her gaze away before her thoughts could drift further. “Well, unless my uncle’s knees heal overnight, or my horse sprouts fingers of her own, I am the only one to do it.”

He did not miss a beat before tying his horse near the entryway and removing his jacket. “Not any longer. I will help you.”

“I hardly think my uncle would wish for his guest to take part in such a demeaning task.”

“But he would wish for his niece to do the same?”

“It has not bothered him thus far.” She cleared her throat. “Why do you not see yourself into the lighthouse, Captain? My uncle has spoken of little else but you in anticipation of your stay. I’m sure he is anxious to see you.”

Abigail attempted to smother the envy that had been simmering within her for days. Uncle Ellis was simply looking forward to spending time with his old friend’s son. That was all. Her uncle still enjoyed her company, she was sure of it.

“I will seek him out in a moment,” Captain Kendricks said. His eyes scanned the room before he headed toward the tools propped up in the corner of an empty stall. “After the work here is finished.”

She propped a fist on her waist as he joined her with a spade. “Do you think me incapable of accomplishing this task on my own?”

“Not in the least.” He bent over his tool, his arms extended, and his face paled. He must have forgotten about his wound, but he carried on, though slower than before. “However, I am a gentleman. And my mother taught me to never leave a lady in distress.”

“Cleaning up horse manure hardly sorts me as distressed.”

“I am quite certain that most women would disagree with you.”

He was right.

She had no great aversion to mucking out her horse’s stall, but it was not as if she counted down the hours to do it.

Despite his wound, Captain Kendricks worked efficiently at the opposite side of the stall.

She tilted her head to one side as she watched him. “I am surprised a gentleman such as yourself knows how to clean up after a horse. I thought your many grooms would have done the work for you.”

There was that bitter tone again. But why? The man had never done anything to wrong her—unless she counted the fact that he stole

her uncle's good opinion of her and placed it upon himself. And mistook her for a boy.

"I may be a gentleman by birth, Miss Moore," he said, "but I am a sailor at heart."

She understood his words all too well. She had felt the same in regard to her own birth and present circumstances, but she kept her understanding to herself.

"How old were you when you enlisted?" she asked, if only to distract herself from the muscles working in his forearm.

"Fifteen," he replied. "I did so right after my parents' deaths."

Abigail eyed him. "May I ask how they…"

"Of course. They were stricken with the same fever and died days apart."

Her heart twisted. "I am sorry."

The captain gave her a grateful nod before continuing his work, but Abigail remained stationary.

He must have loved his parents. To have the both of them pass so soon would have been unimaginably difficult, especially for a young boy. However, she had no way of knowing the man's grief, for her own experience was quite different.

But those were thoughts she no longer allowed herself to dwell on.

"Had you planned on enlisting before they passed?" she asked.

His lips curved. "No. Joining the navy was a way to escape. My brother, Lionel, who is six years older than I am, had married months before our parents' deaths. He inherited our family estate, Clowey Hall, and encouraged me to continue my schooling and join the clergy, as my parents had wished."

For some reason, the image of the captain, with his strong jaw and captivating eyes, preaching from the pulpit caused Abigail great amusement. She could hardly imagine any woman in his congregation learning much from his sermons. They would be far too distracted.

Just as Abigail was in that moment. She gave her head a little shake. "I'm sure I may safely assume *that* profession did not take."

"Not in the least," he said. "I knew my family wished it, but the mere thought of sitting indoors all day, pouring over scripture, preaching, and divining God's will for His people was enough to scare me away from the occupation for good. Adventures on the high seas sounded far more appealing to my young, adventurous mind."

Abigail leaned against the pitchfork, her hand curled around the handle. She had forgotten about the stall entirely as she listened, enraptured by his tale.

"I told my brother such, but he was adamant I try something else. He became very protective of me when our parents died. He

attempted to convince me to instead seek out a profession in the law, or even take on work at Clowey Hall. But in the end, he knew I had my heart set on the navy. So he signed for me, despite protesting every step of the way."

"And have you seen him often since?"

"Occasionally," he responded. "Never for long, though. He is quite happily settled with his wife and their two children."

"Will you see them while you are awaiting reassignment?" she asked. "Or have you taken official leave due to your wound?"

He straightened, resting a hand on his upper left arm. "No." He gave a soft chuckle. "I am, in fact, to retire."

"Oh," she said, taken aback. She did not know of many men who willingly retired in the height of their career. Still, it was not her place to question such a personal decision.

Abigail was startled again when the captain propped his spade against the wall and made for new hay outside of the stall. How had she not noticed he had cleaned the entire stall himself?

Quickly, she stepped to his side, helping him carry the fresh straw as he favored his left arm.

"Well, if you are retiring," she said, spreading the straw across the floor, "you certainly will have more time to see your family. Will you return to them and remain at the estate?"

He dropped the straw to the floor and scattered it around with his boot. She wondered if he'd hurt his arm again.

"To be perfectly candid," he began, "I haven't fully considered what I will do."

Abigail stared, her brow creased. She knew his decisions were none of her concern, but her curiosity would not be satisfied. "May I ask why you left the navy then? After all, you cannot yet be thirty. Your retirement surely could have been years from now."

He appeared thoughtful for a moment. "It was a decision I did not come to lightly, I assure you. Life on the sea was curative. Far more than anything else could have been. I was able to process my parents' deaths and progress more than I would have in any other profession. Nothing can compare to life aboard a ship. But then…nothing can compare to the loneliness I felt as a sea captain."

Abigail chewed her inner lip. Her own circumstances at Golowduyn could certainly keep up with the feelings of seclusion the captain must have felt. But she kept her thoughts to herself. The man certainly would not wish to listen to her hardships.

"At any rate," Captain Kendricks continued, "I felt a change was in order. I wish for different life. A better life. Though, I admit, I am at a loss as to what to do to find that better life."

Their eyes met, but Abigail dipped her head as her heart skipped

a beat. She had become too invested in the captain's words. How had that happened? Typically, she abhorred the forced conversation that took place between near-strangers. She far preferred remaining silent or ignoring people she felt uneasy around—if only to avoid the discomfort of exchanging trite words. But with the captain, for reasons she could not comprehend, the familiar feeling had not occurred.

That is, until he spoke next.

"Now, Miss Moore," he said, "You have heard about my life. Tell me something about yours."

He looked at her expectantly, but Abigail hesitated. "Oh, there is certainly nothing of interest that has occurred in my life, I assure you."

"That cannot be true," he said. "You live in a lighthouse, after all." When she said nothing, he continued. "May I ask how you came to live here?"

Her mind raced. What could she say without revealing the past she had worked so hard to forget? "My uncle and I are each other's only living relatives, so he brought me here to live with him."

"So your parents have passed away, as well?"

She nodded, praying he did not attempt to commiserate with her. From what she understood, his mother and father were very loving, and hers…were not.

"And you have no siblings?"

"No, I do not." She looked at the stall floor, desperately searching for something to distract her thoughts from swirling into her past.

But Captain Kendricks's questions continued. "Did you live with your uncle elsewhere before coming to Golowduyn?"

"No, I was at a boarding school until I was nine years old."

"I see. And did you enjoy it there?"

The captain had to know she was uncomfortable. Why did he carry on so?

"It was…overcrowded." That was the nicest thing she could think of to describe the school she had so despised. Memories from her childhood crept through the locked cage she kept them in, and her chest tightened. She needed an escape before he could think of anything else to ask her.

"Thank you for helping me, Captain," she said, walking outside of the stall. "Though you did not have to."

"Miss Moore," he called after her. She stopped with her hand on the stall door. "I can only imagine the amount of work you must have, and I know my staying here will not make your life easier. So I should like to offer my services to you. If you need help with anything, please, do not hesitate to ask."

Abigail did not know how to respond. She could not deny that she

needed help at the lighthouse—and that Captain Kendricks's stay had produced more work for her. But how could she accept his help when he was supposed to be their guest?

Furthermore, if he *did* help, how could she go on when he would inevitably depart, leaving her in the same exhausted manner she had grown accustomed to?

Rather than accepting his offer, or making any decision at all, she simply excused herself. As she approached the stable doors, however, something within her made her pause.

"Captain," she said, her eyes focusing on him across the stall, "I believe that your parents would be proud of the decision you made to join the navy. You fought to keep others safe, and that is a noble profession."

His eyes softened as he stared at her, but before he could give a response, she darted from the stables and scurried across the grass to the lighthouse.

Chapter Four

During dinner that evening, Abigail had not heard her uncle speak so enthusiastically in months. She understood the reasoning behind his high spirits—for who could *not* be happy when in conversation with Captain Kendricks?

Throughout the meal, she lost track of how often she stared in his direction, listening intently to the stories he shared, watching his brown eyes brighten as he spoke of his love for the sea.

"You are like your father in that regard, Captain," Uncle Ellis said before sharing memory after memory of the departed Mr. Kendricks.

All the while, Abigail struggled to join the conversation. After all, she did not have extraordinary tales of battles on a ship, nor memories she could share of the captain's father and her uncle's friend.

After dinner, Uncle Ellis asked Abigail to join them in the sitting room. In an effort to prove she was just as entertaining and interesting as the captain, she set aside her chores and engaged in the discussion as best she could, though her feelings of inadequacy continued.

The topic focused on Captain Kendricks's family before the subject of Golowduyn surfaced, and Abigail's mood finally improved. Especially when the captain leaned forward in his seat with interest.

"I admit," he said, "I have always been intrigued by the workings of lighthouses. Perhaps it is due to the many times they have kept me from danger while at sea."

Uncle Ellis propped his hands beneath his chin. His cane lay forgotten on the floor. "Have you seen the lamps of any of them?"

"No, I have never had the opportunity."

"Well, I would take you up Golowduyn myself," Uncle Ellis said, "but after my latest excursion, I fear my knees would not last." His eyes did not reflect the familiar gloom Abigail had become so accustomed to. Instead, they shone with excitement. "But you would be more than welcome to join my niece this evening as she lights them."

Abigail struggled to hide her apprehension. Ensuring that the lamps were lit was their top priority. Or had her uncle forgotten? She could not bring Captain Kendricks to the lamp room. Suppose he distracted her? Not that she would have any reason to become unfocused around him, of course.

Though the way her heart was fluttering due to his gaze being focused on her was certainly troubling.

"I wouldn't wish to interfere with your work," he said.

Well, at least one of the men seated before her had sense.

"Nonsense," Uncle Ellis said. "She would be delighted to show you. After all, there is no one who knows the inner workings of Golowduyn better than my niece."

Abigail nearly fell off her seat. Had her uncle just paid her a compliment? Suddenly, the thought of taking the captain to see the lamps did not seem so very bad after all.

"I would be happy to show you, Captain."

After retrieving a pail of oil from the large vats in the brick hutch that butted up against the lighthouse, they made their way up the spiral staircase.

Abigail held the pail in one hand and her skirts in the other, leading the way. The captain's boots thumped against the iron steps as he followed her.

After a moment, she paused briefly to switch the oil to her other hand, thick working gloves protecting her fingers.

"May I hold the oil for you?" he offered as they continued up the steps.

Abigail recalled their previous conversation in the stables. He was being a gentleman by offering his help, but she was still uneasy. After all, it had been some time since she had received any help at all around the lighthouse.

Momentum was all that kept her going each day, all that prevented her from crumbling under the constant, backbreaking work. She feared if she yielded, even for the brief time the captain was their guest, it would only allow her to realize just how tired she was. She may never make pace again.

"Thank you," she said, "but I am accustomed to the task."

They reached the first window as their breath grew heavy. Light shone forth through the glass, lighting the tower in hazy orange and yellow.

"How often are you required to climb these steps?" Captain Kendricks asked.

"Every three to four hours," she replied, "dependent upon when the lamps are to remain lit. I must light them a half hour before sunset and extinguish them a half hour after sunrise. When it storms, though,

we keep them on until the weather passes. We also like to remain upstairs during the storms as a precaution, to spot ships faster or relight the lamps if one or two of them burn out."

She swapped the oil to her other hand.

"May I ask why you do not bring two pails at a time to save yourself a trip?"

"I do on occasion. Usually when I can tie up these cumbersome skirts a little." She waved her hand clutching the fabric of her dress. "But with two pails it is more difficult to allow one arm a respite. Not to mention, it is near impossible to receive any rest in the watch room on account of it being far too cold, so I may as well go downstairs again to sleep for a few hours."

He didn't respond. She wondered if he was focusing on his breathing instead—a thought that pleased her far too greatly. She would have been terribly upset had the captain been able to make it up the steps his first time without becoming winded.

When they reached the halfway point, Abigail paused on the small landing. "I thought you would appreciate a rest."

His broad chest rose and fell with deep, steady breaths. "I would, indeed. It is remarkable you make the climb so often."

She placed the oil down at her feet and rubbed her gloved hands together to remove the creases the pail handle had caused in her skin. "Practice certainly helps. I've been Uncle's assistant for nearly eight years now, ever since he removed the prior help."

When most girls Abigail's age were celebrating their coming out, attending their first Seasons in London, fifteen-year-old Abigail had been watching over a lighthouse by herself. Even still, if she had the chance to go back, she would choose the latter.

"Why was the previous assistant removed?" Captain Kendricks asked. His hands rested on his hips, his breathing growing steadier.

"He was found sleeping during a storm when he was on duty," she explained. "Uncle was furious. It was just as well, though, as we couldn't afford to keep him on any longer. We lost our cook, maid, and stable hand for the same reason. We…"

She stopped. Had she completely taken leave of her senses? There she was, sharing things that did not need sharing.

She glanced toward the captain, his watchful eyes on her. She should not have stopped their ascent. Without work to distract her, her tongue had been loosened—and she had finally become aware that they were, once again, alone.

Her uncle obviously had no qualms with the situation, otherwise he would not have suggested the captain joining her. So if Uncle Ellis did not take issue, then neither would she. After all, this was far less intimate than when she had cleaned his wound. At least the captain

was clothed this time.

She cleared her throat and retrieved the pail of oil.

She would not think any more on it. Not while she had work to do. “Shall we continue?”

Gavin followed behind Miss Moore in silence. She clearly wished to say nothing further about her current financial state, so he allowed their conversation to drop.

Still, questions surrounding the woman swirled about his mind. Why did she always appear hesitant when speaking of her past? How had they gone from being able to afford servants to barely having enough funds for themselves? And how on earth was she so strong as to march up the steps as quickly as she did, in a dress with a pail of oil in her hands?

These questions and more continued as they neared the final steps. Gavin fought the urge to hold his aching side. He had been a hardworking sailor for fifteen years. He should not be gasping for air after a little climb.

He followed Miss Moore into a small room at the top of the tower and willed his breathing to remain even.

The sun shone in through the window facing the sea. A small set of stairs curled up in the center of the room, reaching a latch door in the ceiling. Nearby, a wooden bowl with a curled piece of old meat rested on top of a table—a table that appeared to be on its last legs as it leaned up against the wall.

Miss Moore picked up a broom that was lying on the floor and propped it up against a wall. A pretty blush reddened her cheeks. “I did not have time to straighten up.”

“It is no matter,” Gavin said. The last thing the woman should have to worry about was keeping up an appearance for his sake.

He studied her for a moment, the pink on her cheeks only heightening her delicate features—a slightly turned-up nose, high cheekbones, and long, dark eyelashes.

She certainly was beautiful, there was no denying that. But there was something else. Something more than her physical appearance that pulled Gavin toward her. Was it her strength and resolve to save others, himself included, or her tenacity to prove herself capable of accomplishing any task? Or was it because they were alone, unchaperoned, and Miss Moore did not even seem to bat a single eye in hesitation, focusing instead on her duty to her lighthouse?

Of course, this was not the first time the two had been alone together, though the circumstances were vastly different. Before, a handful of wounded men had been in the next room, Gavin had just been rescued from a shipwreck, and his pain had been acute—not to

mention he had also been half-dressed.

But now, with the woman standing alone before him, her auburn hair glinting in the warm glow of the sun, his heart struggled to maintain its steady beating.

Her blue eyes flashed in his direction. Before she might discover the affect she'd had on him, Gavin focused his attention on a few worn books splayed out across the small cot at the side of the room.

Excellent. Something with which to distract himself.

"So you enjoy reading?" he asked.

She cleared her throat. "I do, although I have exhausted all of those books. Trinity House will be sending more soon, I believe."

"Trinity House," Gavin repeated. He recognized the name as the governing body for most of the lighthouses in England. "They purchase new books for you to read?"

"No, they lend us prior used copies. It would certainly be more enjoyable to read a novel that did not have missing pages, but we manage fine enough."

Their conversation paused as Miss Moore led the way to the smaller set of stairs, and Gavin followed her up the steps, joining her at the top.

A large structure housing the lamps was set in the center of the room surrounded by glass panels. She placed the oil on the floor by her side and reached forward, filling the lamps one by one from the spout at the end of a small tin cup that she had filled with oil.

"These are Argand lamps," she said. "They shine brighter and last longer than the ones we had prior. It is not difficult to fill them, but with one and twenty, it can be tedious. Especially when oil spills must be cleaned up."

Gavin watched in silence as she filled each lamp, noting the concentration on her brow. He knew better than to speak. He did not wish to interrupt her work.

She produced a tinderbox from a small chest at the side of the room and went about lighting each lamp. "The wicks must be trimmed often to prevent soot from loosening and dirtying the glass." She waved a finger around the room. "And the windows must be cleaned daily, inside and out by using the gallery."

Gavin eyed the small, exposed platform surrounding the outside of the lamp room she motioned to. The landing hardly seemed sturdy. His stomach tightened at the thought of the platform giving way, or a simple misguided step from Miss Moore that could prove deadly. How did her uncle bear the thought of her doing such a task each day?

His attention returned to Miss Moore as she stood to remove the coverings of three curved, silver pieces positioned behind the lamps. Gavin squinted as the light brightened with each cover that was

removed.

"These are the refractors," she explained. "As you can see, they reflect the lamps, allowing the light to become brighter. They must be covered when not in use to protect the silver coating, thereby allowing the best reflection."

Gavin shook his head in awe. "It is remarkable." He tilted his head to one side. "But, how do they rotate?"

"Come, I will show you."

She led the way back to the watch room where a metal structure stuck out from the floor behind the small set of stairs. She placed her hands on the wheel at the top of the metalwork. "This must be turned each time we refill the lamps. Below is a weight that slowly pulls down, causing the gears of the clockwork mechanism to rotate, and in turn, it moves the lamps upstairs. When the weight reaches the bottom, the rotation stops."

"Is it heavy?" he asked.

She stepped away and motioned him toward the structure. "You may see for yourself, if you like."

Surprised with her offer, he took a step forward to turn the wheel. It barely moved a finger's width. "Oh, it is heavy." He pressed harder before the wound in his arm protested with a sharp pierce. "I think I will allow you to finish, though, or I will be needing you to see to my wound again."

He noted the slightest curve of her lips as he stepped aside, watching her crank the wheel around.

When the work was completed, they stood together in front of the window, staring at the brilliant white sun resting on the horizon between the ocean and clouds.

"The work you do is simply remarkable, Miss Moore," Gavin said. "You must feel deeply satisfied to live in such a place of beauty, and with such a purpose."

"I do," she said. Her eyes took on a faraway look, as if she did not realize she spoke. "I believe Uncle felt that way, too, at one time. Do you know, he spent years researching what county in England was in need of a lighthouse most? He decided on Cornwall for the beauty of the location and the kindness of the people. He moved from inn to inn, speaking with locals and officials until he finally decided upon Dulatha Cliffs.

"Then he used his own living to fund the construction of it. Everyone thought he was mad, yet he surprised them all with how well he took to his duties. But now…now he cannot do any of what was once required of him."

Gavin hesitated. "Your uncle's injury, may I ask what happened?"

She reached up, rubbing the back of her neck, her other arm

crossed over her stomach. “Last September, he fell from the gallery. It was only a short distance, and he was tethered to the top with a rope, but he swung toward the tower and landed against his knees.”

Gavin winced.

Having experienced the fall, how could Mr. Moore allow his niece to risk the same? Of course it was their duty, but Gavin couldn’t fathom ever allowing anyone he loved to go about such a risky task. “Has he improved at all since?”

“He can now walk, when before even that was painful for him, but stairs and inclines are still difficult.” She lowered her voice, as if her uncle could hear her words. “He does little else but read and sleep while I tend to the lighthouse. His spirits have been brought so very low. That is why it will be good for him to have you here—to remind him there is life beyond his injury.”

Their eyes met. A strange vulnerability flashed across her face before she looked away. “I suppose we ought to return to him now, though. He will be wondering what is keeping us.”

She gave him a fleeting look before leading the way back down the stairs, and Gavin followed her in silence.

* * *

Abigail wasn’t sure if it had been the kindness the captain had shown her—or his keen interest in the lighthouse—that had caused her to lower her defenses and reveal her weaknesses. Either way, she regretted her honesty, for Captain Kendricks had become relentless in his offers of help.

No, they were no longer offers. They were actions.

Each morning, she would wake up to the stables already cleaned, the hens’ eggs gathered, and one more thing that needed fixing, mended.

She refused to acknowledge how his help had eased her burdens. If she did, his departure would make things all the more difficult for her.

When she spoke to Uncle Ellis about the captain’s unrelenting help, her uncle would merely say, “What a thoughtful gentleman,” and be on his way.

At first, Abigail had thought perhaps her uncle had brought Captain Kendricks to Golowduyn as a potential suitor. But she had set aside those ridiculous thoughts within just a few days. It was clear, what with the amount of time Uncle Ellis spent with the captain, that her uncle clearly wished for a friend for himself—a friend that Abigail could never be.

The realization had caused her unpleasant jealousy to increase. She felt ignored, forgotten. Even more so than before the shipwreck.

After all, Captain Kendricks's work was being noticed—and hers was not.

With such bitter feelings, Abigail had taken to avoiding both of the gentlemen, though the task proved difficult in such close living quarters.

One morning, a few days later, Abigail rode for St. Just the moment she extinguished the lamps. She was relieved to be away from the lighthouse, if only to escape Uncle Ellis's constant fawning over the captain—and Captain Kendricks's constant gaze in her direction, as if he were watching to see what she needed help with next.

She meandered through the streets and visited a few shops before begrudgingly returning to her horse. The longer she put off her chores, the more she would have to see to later. Unless, of course, Captain Kendricks had already seen everything finished.

"Good morning, Miss Moore."

Abigail recognized his deep voice before she even turned around to face him.

Captain Kendricks strode toward her, leading his dark horse behind him. At his side were the Causeys, a young, newly-wedded couple Abigail had known since childhood.

"How are you, Miss Moore?" Mrs. Causey asked first after curtseys and bows. Her blonde ringlets fluttered against her temples, and her dimples deepened as she beamed on the arm of her husband. The two had been married for nearly a year, and still, their glow remained.

"Fine, thank you," Abigail responded. She glanced between the captain and the couple. "I did not know the three of you were acquainted."

"Oh, yes," Mrs. Causey responded, "but only just. Captain Kendricks was kind enough to help Mr. Causey and I when our carriage became stuck in the mud a few days ago."

"Because someone insisted on venturing forth in the middle of a storm," Mr. Causey said with a wink in his wife's direction.

"Please, Mr. Causey, you were just as anxious as I was to go out of doors."

Abigail's lip twitched. She had always liked the both of them. Their carefree nature and kindness made her feel more comfortable than most people in St. Just did.

"Well, we shall not keep you any longer, Miss Moore," Mrs. Causey said. "Lovely to see you again, Captain Kendricks."

The Causeys nodded in departure before ambling down the street, their heads close together, as if carrying on a secret conversation for only their ears to hear.

“Charming couple,” Captain Kendricks said.

Abigail turned to face him. “Yes, they are.”

They stood in silence for a moment, and Abigail fidgeted with the reins still in her hands.

“I did not know you were coming to St. Just today,” he said, “otherwise I would have waited to join you.”

“I was merely picking up an item for my uncle.” She turned around, stroking her horse’s roan neck in an effort to not look at the man. “And what manner of business brings you to town?”

“Just a friendly visit with Lieutenant Harris.” He moved a step closer. “We were discussing the latest news concerning the Sanders brothers.”

Abigail tried for indifference, but her interest was piqued. “Have their trials been set yet?”

Captain Kendricks explained that the younger brother would remain free thanks to the elder. “But Sanders’s trial will be within a week or two, when enough captains are in Penzance to hold the court martial.”

“Is Myles still upset with you?” she asked.

“Of course.” He stroked the bridge of his black horse’s nose. “But I do not blame him for his anger. After all, I *am* responsible for what is to happen to his brother.”

Abigail pulled in her chin, a bewildered look on her brow. “Both of them behaved freely, Captain. They knew what they were doing. I believe guilty men ought to take responsibility for their actions, but guilty, you are not.”

He studied her for a moment, his expression unreadable. “Thank you, Miss Moore.” Their eyes met, and she looked away with discomfort before he spoke again. “Are you to return to Golowduyn now?”

She nodded silently.

“Might we return together then?”

Abigail chewed the inside of her lip. If she spent more time with the man, she might grow to like him—even more than she already did. And where would that leave her once he left? No, she would be better off protecting her heart and keeping the captain far enough away that he could not break down any of her walls.

But as she could hardly admit her plan to keep away from him, she had no option but to accept his offer.

“Yes,” she eventually said with a soft sigh, “that would be fine.”

He moved to her side at once, lacing his fingers together and leaning forward at the side of her horse. She stared blankly for a moment before realizing he was there to help her mount. She muttered a quick thank you before gingerly placing her foot in his

hands. He effortlessly hoisted her up, and she situated herself as he moved around his own horse.

A voice called his name from nearby, and Abigail turned to see an approaching, open-top carriage slowly pulling to a stop in front of them. She noticed Captain Kendricks facing the mother and daughter sitting within, dressed in their finest, with eyes focused solely on him.

The Stedmans.

Months had passed since she'd had the misfortune of being near the both of them in town. If only she had left a moment sooner, she might have missed them altogether.

"Captain Kendricks," Mrs. Stedman greeted.

Her daughter's eyes focused on the captain unabashedly.

Abigail forced herself to appear unruffled, but even the mere voice of the woman wrapped icy arms around her middle, preventing her from drawing in a breath. How did they know each other? Captain Kendricks had spent each evening at the lighthouse, and nearly every moment each day, so how could he have found time to become acquainted with the women?

"Good morning," he returned. "I trust you both are well."

"Oh, exceptionally well, sir," Miss Stedman responded with batting lashes. Her slow blinking reminded Abigail of the mouth of a fish she had caught the day before.

She wondered if Captain Kendricks noticed Miss Stedman's shameless stares, or if he enjoyed the attention.

An uncomfortable burn settled in her chest.

"We are surprised to still see you here, Captain," Mrs. Stedman said. "We were sure you would have left for your brother's already."

"No, but I will be in the next week or two, ma'am."

"In that case, you must dine with us this evening." Mrs. Stedman leaned forward. "You know, we have both been quite anxious to look after your well-being ever since meeting you while visiting Mrs. Rennalls."

Of course. Captain Kendricks would have had his wound tended to by Mr. Rennalls, the physician. And if there was one thing Abigail knew about Mr. Rennalls—it was that he had the most gossip-mongering woman in St. Just for a wife.

"Thank you for the offer, Mrs. Stedman," he said. "But I have already promised myself at the Moores this evening. Another time, perhaps."

The Stedmans finally focused on Abigail. She wondered if they had been ignoring her on purpose or if they truly had not noticed her sitting directly behind Captain Kendricks.

"Oh, Miss Moore, lovely to see you," Mrs. Stedman said. "I hope your uncle is in good health."

There was nothing Abigail disliked more than rehearsing pleasantries with people she did not wish to speak to.

Especially the Stedmans.

"He is, ma'am."

The brightness in Mrs. Stedman's eyes faded. She turned to Captain Kendricks. "How do you find your stay at the lighthouse, sir?"

"Very enjoyable. So much so that I quite dread having to leave."

Abigail knew he answered politely, but she could not deny the satisfaction that swelled within her at the disappointed look on Mrs. Stedman's face.

"Lovely," the woman murmured. "Oh, Miss Moore, I heard that you have been unable to hire a serving girl still. You must be positively exhausted taking on all that menial labor yourself. Poor girl. You really must allow me to help. I'm sure I could find someone willing to work for what little pay you are able to offer."

The indignation swirling within Abigail scorched her insides. She glanced to Captain Kendricks, who appeared unaware of Mrs. Stedman's veiled slight as they awaited Abigail's reply.

For some reason, his ignorance was what bothered her the most.

"Thank you, Mrs. Stedman," she said, sweeter than even the woman herself had managed, "but as always, we are not in need of your help. Or have you forgotten my uncle telling you the same many years ago?"

Mrs. Stedman's brown eyes hardened, but Abigail hardly took notice as she urged Glastaish forward into a trot down the street. She told herself she did not care if Captain Kendricks joined her. If he enjoyed the company of the Stedmans, he was not the man she thought he was.

Moments later, however, reaching the outskirts of town, he caught up with her. "Miss Moore? Are you all right?"

Abigail glanced at him sidelong. He sat tall and sure on his steed. His jaw was shadowed in whiskers. He must not have had time to shave that morning before leaving for St. Just. Not that she minded. It gave him more of a rugged look, something she quite liked.

She tore her gaze away. How had she allowed her thoughts to stray to such a thing?

"Of course I am well. Why would you think differently?"

Glastaish shook her head. The reins jingled as Captain Kendricks spoke. "Because of your abrupt departure from the Stedmans. Did they say something to upset you?"

"No."

He eyed her in apparent disbelief. "After you left, she asked me to extend an invitation for you and Mr. Moore to dine with her next week at Pryvly House."

“How very generous,” Abigail said.

She knew the invitation was meant to show the captain how very kind Mrs. Stedman was, but he clearly could not see it.

“Will you accept the invitation?” he asked.

“No. I will not.”

“May I ask why?”

She sighed. Perhaps she would be better off explaining. With any luck, his questions might cease then. “Because…there is a rather unpleasant history between our families.”

Captain Kendricks waited, curiosity clear in his dark eyes.

“When the lighthouse was first built,” she began, “and we were newly arrived in Cornwall, Mrs. Stedman pursued my uncle.”

His eyebrows raised in surprise. “I see.”

“Her husband had died two years prior,” she continued, “and as Uncle was wealthy and considered quite handsome when he was younger, naturally, he caught her eye.”

“What happened between them?”

“My uncle humored her calls for weeks. She often hinted that I needed a mother figure if I had any hope of becoming as beautiful as her own daughter. Fortunately, Uncle told her he had no interest in marrying anyone. She was obviously offended, and her visits ended.”

“Understandably,” Captain Kendricks said. “Is she trying to make amends, do you think, by inviting you both to dinner? Accepting would certainly be a way to mend the gap between your two families.”

Abigail pulled her horse to a stop. “You think that is what she does by extending her invitation?”

He shrugged, stopping his horse, as well. “Her kindness could hardly be misconstrued. It would be rather unfeeling of you to deny the invitation.”

His tone was innocent enough, but his words sickened her.

“Unfeeling of me?” she questioned. “*Her* kindness? I suggest you do not speak your opinion on matters of which you know nothing, sir.”

“Well, has she been unkind to you?”

“Of course she has,” she answered. “She has taken a marked dislike to me ever since Uncle refused her. The rumors she has spread about the both of us are…”

She ended with an aggravated sigh. Why should she share more about their past when he would believe the Stedmans’ words over hers anyway? They were far more refined than a lowly lighthouse keeper’s niece. Of course he would take their side.

“Miss Moore, I did not mean to upset you, I only meant to—”

“I know precisely what you meant to do, Captain Kendricks,” she

said, nearly baring her teeth. “You meant to bring our families together. You meant to *help*. But as you have not learned this lesson yet, allow me to inform you plainly. Meddling in the affairs of others only makes matters worse for all involved. If you would be so kind, sir, my relationship with the Stedmans is none of your concern.”

Her words were harsh, but his suggestion that she was at fault—not the Stedmans—for the deterioration of their relationship caused a stinging in her soul she could not subdue.

With a short shout for her horse to ride on, she left Captain Kendricks behind, willing herself to think no longer on the man calling after her, or the painful memories his words had produced.

* * *

That evening, Abigail slammed doors, stomped from room to room, and refused to respond in anything more than a grunt and a scowl when spoken to. She did not care if the men thought she behaved poorly. She had treated the captain, and her uncle, with kindness from the very beginning. What was it all for if Uncle Ellis did not notice and Captain Kendricks called her unfeeling?

After lighting the lamps, she went straight to bed, pouting in her room as she heard the hum of their voices coming from the sitting room until well after dark. Her uncle never remained awake with *her* to speak for hours on end. What were they both speaking about—apart from the captain’s many accomplishments?

She folded her arms, staring at the ceiling. She imagined Captain Kendricks telling her uncle that Abigail could no longer manage the lighthouse on her own. Her uncle would no doubt agree. Perhaps he had been planning all along to replace her with the better-suited captain so that Uncle Ellis might retire, and she would be forced to assume more ladylike pursuits.

Her insides churned at the thought.

Only after the first refilling did Abigail finally fall asleep. She dreamt that Captain Kendricks had married Miss Stedman. After they both moved into the lighthouse, there was no room left for her, so Uncle Ellis sent Abigail to live in the stables, where she shoveled manure for the rest of her days.

She awoke with a groggy mind, feeling even worse than before. After retrieving the oil, she padded up the stairs.

She knew her musings were silly, and her dreams even more so, but Uncle Ellis’s doting attention on Captain Kendricks only magnified her insecurities.

With a heavy heart, she entered the watch room, but she paused when she heard the familiar clang of an empty pail coming from the lamp room.

“Uncle?”

Guilt lurched in her chest. She had been utterly thoughtless that evening. Uncle Ellis had clearly heard her petulantly tramping about earlier and had decided to fill the lamps now to ease her burden.

She imagined the pain he must have felt when climbing the steps, to have made it up with the oil, and her heart twisted. But when she saw two black boots descending the steps instead of her uncle’s worn brown ones, her mouth went dry.

The captain’s face came into view. His mouth parted, but he made no sound.

“Captain Kendricks,” she began, confusion settling upon her brow. “What are you doing?”

Her eyes traveled down the length of his loose, untucked shirt and rolled up sleeves before focusing on the empty pail in his hands—the sides still glistening with residual oil.

Her tone dropped. “What are you doing?” she asked again.

Captain Kendricks took a step toward her, holding up his free hand, as if to tame a wild animal. Her frustration grew.

“I was only trying to help, Miss Moore. Your—”

“Help?”

Her words came out in a squeak. Logic blurred as rage rose. Everything from the few days before crashed down upon her—exhaustion from her lack of sleep, anger from her interaction with the Stedmans, diffidence from the captain’s flowering relationship with her uncle. She couldn’t handle it any longer. She couldn’t handle any of it.

“How are you helping, Captain?” Her nostrils flared, and her lips thinned as she spoke. “I have tried greatly to keep quiet about your incessant need to cast your aid about while you are here, but tonight? You have gone too far, sir.”

“If you will only allow me to explain, I—”

“No.” She placed her pail of oil on the ground, unable to trust her trembling hands to keep their grip. “You do not have the right to be here. The keeping of this lighthouse is not a game, in which anyone can play the part of keeper, no matter how well-intentioned. There are lives at stake. You of all people should know that.”

His brow lowered. “I do not consider the safety of this lighthouse, nor my fellow comrades in the Royal Navy, a game to be played.”

“Your cavalier behavior would suggest otherwise. After all, you are not trained to refill the lamps. You are not qualified.”

“I am well aware, however, your uncle—”

“My uncle would be appalled to find you up here!”

He took a step toward her. “No, we—”

“What?” she interrupted. “You what?”

Dark thoughts surfaced, worries from before escalating until she could no longer keep herself from revealing the fears she had buried deep within her heart.

"Of course," she said, her voice slow and steady, venom dripping from each word. "This is what you must have planned all along. Your clear interest in the lighthouse, your camaraderie with Uncle Ellis. You showed him how supportive and kind you were to his helpless, struggling niece. All of this was to show him how much better you are than me. All of this was to take my place here."

He drew back with a look of disbelief. "That is not what—"

"Yes, it is. You intend to find purpose in running my lighthouse, to push me out so you might fill the days of your naval retirement with something more satisfying. What other reason have you to be up here other than to prove to my uncle that you are more capable than his own niece in looking after Golowduyn?"

He stared at her, aghast. "I cannot believe you are in earnest."

Blood rushed in her ears. She could hardly hear him. She could hardly think. "I want you to leave Golowduyn, Captain. I want you gone by morning, and I do not ever wish to see you here again."

He took an abrupt step toward her. She nearly faltered in her footing, but she continued to face him squarely. Their eyes met, the light from the lamp room casting a low glow around them. She eyed the dark shadows across his face, anger flashing in his eyes.

"I have done nothing but help you, Miss Moore," he said. His deep voice was so penetrating that she finally heard every word. "And now you command me to leave?" His eyes darted back and forth between hers, flickering to her lips, and her breath caught in her throat. "Well you shall have your wish. You will not see me again."

He thrust the pail into her hands, the handle clanking loudly against the side. The sound reverberated through the room as he shook his head with disgust and strode past her.

She listened to his angry footsteps as he stomped down the stairs until the noise disappeared. Alone with the metal gears working below, the light rotating above, and Captain Kendricks's words swirling within her soul, Abigail was overcome with a sense of grief she could not understand.

Chapter Five

"But why must you leave so soon, Captain?"

"A few matters have come up that I cannot ignore any longer."

Abigail listened to the conversation with bated breath. She had come down from the lamps straightaway that morning, intent on ensuring Captain Kendricks had left as he had promised. But when she had heard his voice—along with her uncle's—drifting up the spiral staircase from the front door, she had paused on the steps higher up to listen unobserved.

"Is it something I have done?" she heard her uncle ask.

Guilt turned her stomach. After a restless night spent in the watch room, Abigail had come to her senses regarding her uncle, and she scolded her lack of confidence in him. Of course he would not replace her. He would never do anything to harm her in such a way.

But the captain…she hardly knew him, did she?

"No, you haven't, sir," Captain Kendricks said. "The, er, the trial I must attend has been moved to next week, and I think it would be better if I stayed near Penzance. That is all."

Abigail knew why he lied. If Uncle Ellis had discovered the man last night, her uncle would have turned him out just the same. Never mind that the captain had trimmed the wicks to perfection and had not spilled a single drop of oil in his endeavors—something that irked Abigail endlessly. The man had risked the safety of those men at sea, and that was something Uncle Ellis would not take likely.

"Can you not at least wait for my niece to come down? You two have become friends, after all."

Abigail took a single step down, hoping to better hear the captain's response.

"I…I think it will be better for us all if I leave now."

"Very well," Uncle Ellis finally conceded. "I am sorry to see the last of you, though. Is there any way I may convince you to join us for one last dinner this evening?"

Dinner? Abigail did *not* want to make dinner for the man.

"Perhaps we may dine at The Golden Arms?" Captain Kendricks suggested.

"You know my niece's cooking far surpasses anything you will eat there. No, you must come here."

She heard the captain sigh. "Very well. I will return for dinner this evening. But I would greatly appreciate it if you would inform Miss Moore that I will depart immediately afterward."

"Of course. She will be delighted to see you before you leave."

Captain Kendricks didn't respond. Abigail heard the front door open. Footsteps shuffled forward.

"Mr. Moore," the captain said, "I must thank you for inviting me to stay with you. I've enjoyed every moment, the tales you've shared of my father, the conversations I've had with you and your…your niece. I will miss you both."

Abigail rested her hand on the railing to keep her steady, regret pressing hard against her conscience. But she should not feel regret. She should feel nothing but relief that the man was leaving.

"You are a good man, Captain," Uncle Ellis said. "Just like your father."

Silence passed for a brief moment before the captain's voice faded as he stepped outside. "I will arrange for my trunk to be retrieved and sent to the inn. And please, do remember to tell your niece that I will depart directly after the meal tonight."

Abigail remained on the steps until she heard the door close. The captain's departure had not given her the satisfaction for which she had hoped, so she sought out her uncle. His support for her decision to remove the man would help her to feel better. She was almost sure of it.

She reached the bottom of the spiral stairs just as she caught sight of Uncle Ellis entering the sitting room. She followed him, pausing in the doorway as he sat down on a seat with a groan.

"Abigail," he greeted when he saw her. "You just missed Captain Kendricks. He has decided to leave us today."

She swallowed hard. "Yes, Uncle, I…" She faltered when she caught sight of the tears shining in his eyes. "Uncle Ellis?"

"Forgive me, my dear." He used his palms to swipe at his eyes. "It is silly. But his departure has upset me more than I thought it would. I cannot help but fear that my own actions have caused him to leave. Perhaps my conversation was too dull."

Abigail's hands wrung together. "I'm certain that is not why he left, Uncle."

"Then what else could it be?"

She hesitated, though she knew not why. After all, the captain

had been in the wrong, not she. No, she could not allow her uncle to hurt further. He deserved to know the truth.

"Uncle, I must tell you what occurred last night," she said. "You see, I woke up to refill the lamps, only to discover that the captain had already done so himself."

She waited a moment, allowing her words to sink in. But Uncle Ellis looked more cheerful than anything.

"You caught him in the very act then?" he said. "Oh, I was hoping for it to be a surprise."

An uneasy feeling crept up within her. "A surprise? What do you mean?"

"Well, I thought his helping would ease your burden."

Her thoughts moved rapidly. She held a hand against the doorframe. "Uncle, I do not understand. Did you…did you ask the captain to refill the lamps?"

"Indeed. Though, that was not my original intention. I had planned to do so myself, but I only made it a few steps before my knees gave way. Thankfully I had managed to set the oil aside before it could spill down the steps."

"Uncle Ellis, why did you not call for help?"

"I did," he said. "You must have slept through the noise. But it was just as well. Captain Kendricks soon came and helped me back to my room."

Abigail's cheeks burned. "And then he offered to look after the lamps in your stead?"

"Oh, heavens, no. No, I near begged him before he even considered agreeing. He did not wish to interfere, but I assured him you would be more than happy for his help."

Abigail felt as if she were drowning. "Uncle, was it wise to have an untrained man take on such a responsibility?"

He stared at her, taken aback. "I imagine you were rather thorough with your explanations to him. Besides, any man who can maneuver a ship through a storm and keep so many of his men alive can certainly fill lamps with oil."

She looked away. How could she have been so stupid? That was what Captain Kendricks had been trying to tell her—that her uncle had asked him to help. And how could he have said no? He had no choice but to do as Uncle Ellis requested.

"You are not pleased?" he asked. "Abigail, I did not think asking him was so very wrong. After all, I knew you would be up there soon to refill them yourself. I merely thought that you might have been able to rest longer afterwards. I am sorry if this has upset you."

"No, Uncle. I am simply astonished. Thank you for your kindness."

“Oh, you mustn’t thank me. Captain Kendricks was the one who helped. He will be here for dinner tonight.”

Panic gripped her throat. She had forgotten about dinner.

She glanced to Uncle Ellis. He deserved the truth of what had occurred last night, but the weary look in his eyes, the slight slumping forth of his body on the settee, made her pause. How could she admit to removing the only person to have made her uncle happy in months?

Perhaps she could beg for the captain’s forgiveness, ask him to return for her uncle’s sake? At the thought, dread settled on her soul. But she pushed her selfishness aside. She had behaved foolishly, thinking they wished to end her days of running the lighthouse, when instead, they were merely trying to help. Both men deserved an explanation—and both men deserved an apology.

“I will have dinner prepared for this evening, Uncle,” she said.

“Thank you, Abigail.” He shifted his legs with a wince. His fall on the stairs must have hurt him again.

“Have you seen Mr. Craig as of late?” she asked. “Perhaps I could ride for him today to request a tincture for your pain.”

“No, I will make the journey myself on foot.”

Abigail hesitated. “Are you certain you should walk that far?”

“Walking is the one thing I can do.”

His tone was bitter, but a sudden thought made her dart from the room, returning a moment later with a package in her hand. “If you insist on going yourself, they you must wear these.”

He lifted the lid from the box to reveal a pair of new boots. “Abigail, how did you…I said I would do without a new pair to afford the captain staying with us.”

“Yes, I know, but I had a little extra saved.” She would not tell him that she had been saving up for a pair of boots for herself. After all, *her* knees were fine, and she could look past the occasional pebbles that slipped through the holes in the sides of her own boots. “Try them on. I had them made from the measurements of your older ones. See if they suit.”

He replaced his worn boots with the shining, dark brown pair. He made no response.

Her spirits fell. “Are they not to your liking?”

“No, they are perfect.” His gaze flitted away, but not before she caught a flash of guilt within his eyes. “You are too good to me, my dear.”

No, she wasn’t. She was selfish and insecure—and doubted her uncle when she shouldn’t have. She sat down beside him, taking his hand in hers.

“Uncle, I must apologize. For a great number of things, I’m afraid.

But first for my poor disposition these past few days. I am glad you have had the captain here to entertain you whilst I have behaved in such a poor manner."

"You mustn't apologize, Abigail." He still didn't meet her eyes. "I have spent so long reading books and staying in town with…with Mr. Craig that I hardly notice you of late. It has taken the example of Captain Kendricks helping you in order for me to see the duties you have taken upon yourself. All while I have merely complained about the sorry state of my legs. I am sorry to have been a disappointment to you."

She reached for his other hand. "Uncle, you know I have always considered you to be more my father than anything else. I will be forever grateful that you took me away from the troubled life I led to bring me to a better one here."

A pained expression crossed his face before he stood with the help of his cane. The shadow she had become so used to seeing covered his eyes as he walked from the room. "I will leave now to be back for dinner."

"Very well."

She waited for him to turn around to send him a departing wave, but he never did, vanishing from the house without a single glance back.

* * *

Hours later, Abigail peered from the dining room window, straining her neck to see farther up the path that led to the lighthouse.

It was still empty.

She released an exasperated sigh. She should have expected as much. Uncle Ellis's visits with Mr. Craig always ran late. He would often return while Abigail was tending to the lamps. Still, her uncle knew Captain Kendricks was coming, and he would not risk offending the captain. What could be keeping him?

Smell from the roasting pheasant—the last of that which she had purchased for Captain Kendricks's stay—wafted through the room. She could not enjoy the savory scent, however, as she saw the captain riding around the ridge toward the lighthouse.

Her throat tightened. Perhaps it was better with her uncle not there. Now she could apologize without an audience.

She busied herself setting the table for three, but as a knock sounded, her stomach dropped. It was time. She could no longer avoid the confrontation. Slowly, she approached the front entryway. Her hand lingered on the handle as she drew an unsteady breath.

The captain's stoic face met hers as she finally opened the door. "Miss Moore, I trust your uncle has informed you that he has insisted

upon me joining him for dinner this evening."

His tone was frost on her soul. "Yes, he told me." Her cheeks burned as she took in his rigid stance, hands clasped behind his back. "Please, come in."

He entered but remained formally in the entryway as she closed the door behind him.

"Would you like to wait in the sitting room?" she offered.

He moved down the hallway in silence. Abigail followed him. She practiced her apology once more in her mind. She only needed to say it aloud now.

"My uncle is due to return from St. Just soon. Did you happen to see him on your way here?"

"I did not."

"Well, I am certain he will be here any moment."

She bit her lip. Her pride begged her to remain silent, but her conscience finally won over. "Captain, sir, I would like to apologize for last night. The accusations I made and my unkindness toward you were both uncalled for, and I beg your pardon."

She was not surprised when he turned toward her with his lips still in a firm line. "Your uncle told you then?"

If her blush burned any hotter, she was sure flames would burst forth straight from her cheekbones. "He did."

"So you are aware that I was merely helping him? That I had no intention to cause any harm to you or anyone?"

She tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ear. "Yes, sir. I know you would not have touched the lamps had not my uncle greatly appealed to your mercy."

He hesitated only a moment before speaking. "I accept your apology, Miss Moore. And offer my own for overstepping last night."

"No, please. You did nothing wrong."

They stood in silence, and Abigail—though happy to have the man's forgiveness—felt no relief. After all, the words she had said to him last night could not be so easily reversed.

"You said Mr. Moore was in St. Just?"

She wondered if the captain was as anxious as she was to change the subject. "Yes, visiting the apothecary. He really should have returned by now. He does not like to walk far in the rain."

She crossed the room, eying the darkening clouds from the window. She had already lit the lamps in preparation for that evening's storm.

"Perhaps I ought to ride out," Captain Kendricks said. "See if I can find him before he is caught in the storm alone."

She cursed her behavior again, her wrongful assumption that the gentleman was anything other than sheer goodness and generosity.

She hardly deserved his offer of help, but she accepted it with gratitude, for her uncle's sake.

The captain departed straightaway, and Abigail watched him ride across the cliffside astride his dark horse until he was out of her sight. Her uncle must have simply lost track of the hour. Captain Kendricks would return soon with Uncle Ellis beside him, she was certain.

And yet, the uneasiness within her only increased as time passed.

She covered the food to keep the meal warm, then proceeded to pace through the house. Still, there was no sign of either of them. She began to wonder if Uncle Ellis had taken the longer route home that edged close to the sea. It would certainly take him longer. But would the captain think to go that way?

"I will only go out for a moment," she told herself. "Just to be sure Uncle isn't missed."

She wrapped her shawl around her and ventured forth into the rain that was just beginning to fall. She looked back at the light shining through the storm as she hastened across the cliffside. She should not be leaving the lighthouse at all, but the thought of her uncle being caught in the storm with his knees in such a state spurred her forward.

The wind blew hard against her, tearing the hair from her pins and whipping strands across her brow. The mist from the storm blocked most of her view of the ocean—only the dark gray water near the sand was visible.

She raised a hand to her brow, blocking the wind and rain from her eyes as she strained to see farther south. Still, no sign of her uncle.

She stared at the peninsula pushing out into the ocean, her eyes inevitably falling to the bottom of the cliffs she could see. Just as a precaution, of course.

As her search along the bottom of each cliffside came up empty, any relief she may have felt was short-lived, for she looked to the next ridge, and the next. Would her uncle be at the foot of any of those cliffs?

She glanced over her shoulder. Golowduyn's light still shone, despite the clouds hovering around the tower. She should not have strayed so far. Turning on her heel, she made straight for home. Perhaps the captain and Uncle Ellis were both at Mr. Craig's, waiting out the storm. And then Captain Kendricks would see her uncle safely home.

She repeated the hollow words in her mind, willing herself to believe them. But when she came upon another cliff, forcing herself to look down, to search for what she did not wish to find, her breathing stopped.

"No. No, it is not him."

She ran along the peninsula in a daze, racing to the mainland. Her eyes focused on the dark form crumpled in the sand below until the cliffside prevented her view.

"Uncle!"

The powerful waves below drowned out her cries as she ran down the curved pathway leading to the beach. She wiped the moisture from her eyes. The lifeless form took shape as she neared it. His cane lay a few paces away. And his new boots were scuffed and covered with sand.

"Uncle Ellis! Please!"

He did not stir. The sand was thick, her skirts heavy with rain. She tripped, falling as she approached him and scrambling the rest of the way on her hands and knees until she rounded his body to face him.

Sand speckled his pallid face. Dark circles framed his eyes. He did not move. She focused on his chest, and when the slightest movement occurred, she gasped.

"Uncle Ellis?"

He winced. "Abigail?"

"Yes," she said through her tears. "I am here. You will be all right now. I must find Mr. Rennalls."

She moved to stand, but her uncle's words stopped her, and she leaned in closer to hear him. "No, Abigail. It is too late. Too late."

He released a wheezy breath, and she pulled back. She held her hand at the bottom of her nose. The smell of alcohol lingered in her nostrils. She knew he would occasionally drink with Mr. Craig during their visits, but never had she smelled it so strongly.

"Uncle, what happened?" she asked.

"I tripped," he mumbled, his eyes barely open. "I was pushed…I tripped. Fell and tripped." Each word blended into the other.

"Uncle, you are not speaking sensibly. Lay quietly. I will find help."

She rested a hand upon his chest and scanned the empty beach.

No one would be out in such weather.

No one but the captain.

Her eyes flew to the clifftops, but there was no sign of him. Would he think to look near the cliffs?

"Abigail, you must forgive me."

"Forgive you? For what?"

He drew in a pained breath, his eyes closing again. She held her breath to avoid inhaling the scent of the hard drink still piercing her senses.

"I wanted to be better." He grimaced, the creases in his forehead deepening. "I wanted to change for you."

She tried to make sense of his words, wondering if the fall or the alcohol caused them to slur.

"It is too late, Abigail. For her." His eyes opened, and he stared into the clouds, flinching as the rain splashed on his face. "Do not lose her, Abigail. Please."

"Who, Uncle?"

"Golowa…golowa."

"The lighthouse," she said, finally understanding. "I won't, Uncle. I will take care of Golowduyn."

A tear fell from his eye, sliding down his temple into his sandy hair. "Promise me."

Her voice caught in her throat. "I promise, Uncle."

A low thunder rumbled, and Abigail looked to the sky. The rain fell in droves around them. If only she could get him home, to the lighthouse, she was certain she could save him.

But when she looked back at him, the pain had departed from his blue eyes. He stared up at her, his eyes soft. He reached up, stroking the back of his fingers against her cheek.

"Abigail…"

There he was. The man she had not seen since before his fall. The man who had saved her from her past. The man who had brought her with him to the lighthouse. To teach her, to guide her. To love her. The only member of her family who ever had.

She held onto his hand, keeping it against her face. But his fingers did not return her grasp, and his eyes slowly closed.

"Please, Uncle, stay." Her words ended in a sob, for she knew he was already gone. "Please. You promised me you would not leave me. You promised."

Gavin's search for Mr. Moore at the apothecary's had turned up empty, and when Mr. Craig had said that the lighthouse keeper had not been to see him in months, an uneasiness crept its way into Gavin's heart.

Anxious for any sighting of the man, Gavin sought out Lieutenant Harris at the inn.

"I saw him at the tavern, but he left over an hour ago," the lieutenant said.

The tavern? Why was Mr. Moore at the tavern when he said he'd be with Mr. Craig?

"I can keep an eye out, though," Harris offered, "help him home if I see him."

"Thank you, Harris," Gavin said with an appreciative nod.

He left the inn behind, riding through St. Just with searching eyes before making straight for the cliffs. He told himself that he did not need to search there, that he was worrying over nothing. And yet, he

could not deny his instincts, nor shake the trepidation that hung over him.

When there was no sight of the man in either direction atop the cliffs, Gavin knew that Mr. Moore had either reached Golowduyn—or had fallen to the one place Gavin had prayed he would not have to search.

With a hesitant gaze, he peered down at base after base of each cliff he moved toward. But without any sighting of the man, he neared Golowduyn with a hope sparking in his chest.

Perhaps Mr. Moore *was* already home, warming by the hearth with a hot cup of tea. Miss Moore would no doubt be fussing over him, tending to the fire and pulling off his boots. Then Gavin would arrive and be welcomed inside with a warm meal. Perhaps Miss Moore would be so pleased with her uncle's return that the tension between her and Gavin would dissipate—the disaster from the night before would be forgotten. And they would spend the evening together in comfortable conversation and camaraderie.

Lost in his hope-filled vision, Gavin hardly registered the sight at the bottom of the next cliff until he narrowed his eyes, and a terrible ache sliced through his heart.

The two bodies upon the beach were undisputable. He pulled his jacket tighter around him as rain slipped down his neck, and he urged his horse forward.

He reached the beach in a matter of moments. The wind whistled past his ears. The cold seeped through his clothing and into his very soul as he watched Miss Moore crying over her uncle's lifeless form.

He blinked hard, fighting away the moisture that filled his own eyes. Memories of his own parents' passing flashed through his mind —reminders of the constant ache he'd felt for years as he longed for the kind embrace of his mother, and the encouraging nod from his father.

And now…Miss Moore was to suffer in the same manner, and he could hardly bear the thought.

With leaded limbs, he lumbered forward. Her red eyes lifted, cheeks blotted from tears.

"He's gone," she whispered.

"I'm so sorry, Miss Moore," he responded.

He needed to help her. He *had* to help her. But how?

He looked out to the ocean that had nearly disappeared in the waning light. The clouds thickened. The rain fell harder. They needed to return to Golowduyn, but he could not simply pull Miss Moore away in the midst of her grief.

He moved to her side. She stood up next to him, wiping a hand across her face that was wet from rain and tears.

“Will you help me bring him home?” Her voice trembled.

“Of course,” he said softly.

Gavin hoisted Mr. Moore’s body onto the back of his horse, the wound on his left arm throbbing in protest. The scent of alcohol wafted toward him. So Lieutenant Harris was right. Mr. Moore *had* been at the tavern.

He pushed aside the upsetting information and focused on the task at hand. How had it come to this? How could his father’s friend, *Gavin’s* friend—and Miss Moore’s only living relative—be gone?

He glanced toward the woman as they walked side-by-side toward Golowduyn. She carried Mr. Moore’s cane in her hands, her chin quivering with restrained cries, and Gavin’s empathy rose.

Neither of them spoke as they reached the lighthouse. Miss Moore showed him to the study, placing the cane on the trunk in the corner of the room, before Gavin settled the body on the bed. He turned to face Miss Moore but was met instead with an empty doorway.

He hesitated following after her. Did she wish to be alone, or had she simply been unable to remain in the room with her uncle’s body?

Slowly, he moved through the house, first peering within the dining room. Three settings and trays of covered food spread out across the table.

He winced. If only he had refused Mr. Moore and had not refilled the lamps the night before. Then Miss Moore would never have pushed him—rightly so—from the house, and they would have already eaten the meal she had clearly taken great care to create.

With swirling regret, he made for the sitting room. He found Miss Moore standing near an open window at the back of the room, her arms crossed over her stomach.

Words failed him. After all, anything he might have said would be trite and inconsequential in such a situation.

The rain poured outside, and the ocean roared beneath them—the only sounds heard until Miss Moore spoke.

“He was drunk,” she said softly.

Gavin took a step toward her. “I know.”

“He was not at the apothecary’s this evening, was he?”

He hesitated.

He had to tell her the truth, though he wished he could have waited until she was of a sounder mind. “No, he was not. I was told that Mr. Craig had not seen him in months.”

She didn’t respond, merely closed her eyes.

“Did you happen to speak with him before…”

She flicked a tear sliding down her cheek. “Only for a moment. He did not speak coherently, first telling me he was pushed, then saying he had tripped. With the amount he must have had to drink

this evening, I am more likely to believe the latter."

The wooden floor beneath her had darkened from the water still dripping from her skirts. Her hair hung halfway out of its pins in wet droves. She had to be freezing.

He looked around for her shawl, but it hung near the fire, as wet as her dress. If he had still been staying at Golowduyn, he could have retrieved a blanket from his room to wrap around her shoulders. But now…now he was not sure if he was even welcome to move about like before.

In truth, he wondered if his presence was even wanted. He longed to pull her into his embrace, to hold her as she cried, to comfort her, but the darkness falling over the lighthouse, the fact that they were unaccompanied at Golowduyn, weighed on his mind.

He would never choose to leave Miss Moore. Not if he didn't have to, and especially not right then. As far as he was concerned, Society could be hanged.

But he could not risk her reputation.

He took a step toward her. "Miss Moore, I wish to help you, but I…I cannot stay."

She nodded in silence.

"I know you will need to wait out the storm in the watch room," he began, knowing better than to offer his own help looking after the lamps, "but is there anyone you might consider asking to spend the night here, so you do not have to be alone?"

He knew she liked to keep to herself, to do things on her own, so he was taken aback when she nodded.

"Yes," she said, "the Causeys."

Gavin nodded. Mr. Causey could remain with her uncle's body, and Mrs. Causey could join Miss Moore in the watch room. That would more than suffice until Gavin could come up with a better way to help.

Quickly, he excused himself, knowing the sooner he left, the sooner he could return to her side. He rode across the dark, wet countryside in the direction of Leighton House, the Causey's estate. Fortunately, he had followed the couple back to their home after their carriage had been stuck in the mud, otherwise he would not have had a hope of finding it in the darkening storm.

After reaching the house, Gavin explained the turn of events to Mr. and Mrs. Causey, who agreed to follow him back to the lighthouse at once.

Before long, the three of them arrived at Golowduyn. Gavin tapped three times before slowly opening the door and stepping over the threshold.

"Miss Moore?" he called out.

He stepped aside to allow the Causeys within the home as Miss Moore appeared with swollen eyes in the entryway.

Mrs. Causey made for her with open arms. “Oh, I am so sorry, Miss Moore.”

“Thank you.” Her voice faltered. “Would you like a cup of tea?”

“Oh, no, dear,” Mrs. Causey said, leading her into the sitting room. “No, I am here for you. I will make us tea in a moment. For now, you need not say another word unless you wish to.”

Gavin turned to Mr. Causey, who came up to stand beside him in the doorway of the sitting room.

“We will be sure to stay for as long as Miss Moore needs,” he whispered.

“Thank you, Mr. Causey.”

Gavin remained where he stood, silently watching from the doorway as the man entered the room.

Mrs. Causey had her arm around Miss Moore’s shoulders, the women huddling together on the settee.

He longed to stay, to ensure that Miss Moore would be tended to and taken care of the whole of the night. But with the Causeys’ presence, and their kind attention already focused on Miss Moore, the time had come for him to take his leave.

He took a step back, but Miss Moore’s stare in his direction made him pause.

“Thank you,” she mouthed out.

Gavin could hardly breathe, so crushing was the weight on his chest. He had done next to nothing for the woman, and she was expressing her gratitude for him?

He gave a gentle nod in response, staring into her blue eyes before he turned away and left the lighthouse behind.

Though he had not known the woman for long, he had grown to care for her. And the thought of her being in pain—a pain he understood all too well—made his heart ache.

He would do anything to help ease her burden, to help her feel at peace with her uncle’s passing—truly anything at all. He did not know how else he could help her, but he knew he had to try.

Chapter Six

Abigail numbed to the pain and loneliness of her new life. She stayed busy to keep herself and the lighthouse from falling apart, but after her uncle had been laid to rest, she was struck again that he was, indeed, gone.

The sun was bright the day after his burial, shining down on her as she stood at her uncle's final resting place—the cliffside above Golowduyn. She had purchased a coffin with the remainder of the lighthouse's monthly funds and had chosen to tie a black ribbon around her wrist. She simply could not afford the cost of a mourning gown.

She eyed the mound of dirt before her, tucking a stray lock behind her ear as the wind tugged at her skirts. "I made a promise to you, Uncle," she whispered. Her eyes trailed ahead to where the lamp room of the lighthouse was nearly eye-level. "And I will keep that promise. I will not lose Golowduyn."

Time stood still atop the cliff. Abigail closed her eyes and breathed in the sea air, willing the wind to blow away her troubles, just as it had when she was younger. But things were different now. They could not be so easily resolved.

She turned away from the grave and made her way down the pathway that curved back to the lighthouse.

As she neared the level ground, she caught sight of Captain Kendricks standing nearby, his back to her as he faced the sea. Her heart took a small leap in her chest.

"Good morning, Captain," she greeted.

He turned toward her with a smile that did not reach his eyes. "Miss Moore, I saw you at the grave but thought it better to wait for your return here. I hope I am not intruding."

"No, of course not," she responded.

"May I see you back to the lighthouse?"

"If you wish."

They walked beside each other in silence. Since her uncle's death, the captain had called upon her each day. His visits were often short, occurred out of doors, and nearly always involved Lieutenant Harris—whom Captain Kendricks had been rooming with at the inn in St. Just.

Abigail knew the captain called in such a way to maintain propriety, and she was grateful for his kindness in visiting her. The tension between them from before her uncle's death had disappeared, and she could not deny how she missed his constant presence and companionship in the lighthouse.

"How have you been faring?" he asked, just as he always did.

"Well enough," she responded.

"You do know, if you need any help, you simply—"

"Must ask you?" she asked with a shadow of a smile on her lips. "I know."

In the past few days, Captain Kendricks's offers of help had only increased, despite the fact that he could do little else but visit with her. She appreciated his calls—and his willingness to give his aid—but she could not grow used to them. Not again.

Because soon, his visits would end. Just as her uncle's life had ended. And she would be left alone to pick up the pieces of her new reality.

For now, however, she would accept the small distraction he provided her with, so she might briefly forget her lonely future that stretched out endlessly before her.

"Your visits have already helped me greatly, sir," she said with a glance in his direction. "And I am grateful for them."

He peered down at her before he looked ahead of them. "Are you expecting company?"

She sent him a questioning look before following his eyes to the lighthouse. A carriage waited at the front, and a gentleman stood at the door, knocking.

"Mr. Whitham?" she questioned aloud, too far for the man to hear.

"You know him?"

"He is our banker from St. Ives." She raised her voice. "Good morning, Mr. Whitham."

He turned. "Ah, there you are, Miss Moore."

She moved uneasily toward him. The man hardly looked pleased.

"What can I do for you, sir?" she asked after the polite bow and curtsy had been exchanged.

"Forgive my unannounced visit," he began. "But I have come to discuss a delicate matter with you."

He clasped a bulky bag in front of him with both hands as he glanced sidelong at the captain.

Abigail was certain he disapproved of the two of them alone together.

Abigail introduced the two before Captain Kendricks faced her. “Excuse me, Miss Moore. I will take my leave of you now.”

“Wait,” she said without a thought. She sent a wary glance to Mr. Whitham. Her uncle had always insisted on meeting with the banker alone. She had no notion of how the gentleman was or what he might say—but she had a suspicion that he would treat her with greater fairness if Captain Kendricks remained, present and at her side.

She leaned slightly toward the captain. “Might you be able to stay?”

He stared at her with a blank expression, clearly surprised, before he nodded. “Of course.”

She gave him a grateful look before turning to Mr. Whitham. “Would you care to come inside, sir?”

He gave a curt nod, and together, the three of them moved into the sitting room. Captain Kendricks stood near the hearth, his hands clasped behind his back. Abigail took a seat on the settee, Mr. Whitham across from her.

“Do go on, sir,” Abigail said.

“Very well,” the banker said. “Firstly, I must express my deepest condolences to you for your loss.”

Abigail hardly felt warmed by the rehearsed words, but she dipped her head with appreciation, nonetheless.

“As you well know,” he continued, rifling through his bag with one hand, “Mr. Moore had no living relatives apart from you. As the property was not entailed, and in accordance with Mr. Moore’s will, the land and lighthouse have now been left in your possession.”

The news came as no surprise. Her uncle had told her often how one day the lighthouse would be hers to have and maintain for as long as she wished. She cringed at what she had thought before, of Uncle Ellis replacing her with Captain Kendricks. How wrong she had been.

Mr. Whitham pulled out a stack of papers and closed the bag, setting it on the floor to rest against his leg. “It is my unfortunate duty now, however, to inform you that Golowduyn may not be yours for very long.”

“Excuse me?” She glanced to the captain, who stared across the room out the window. He clearly strived to appear as if he had not been listening—no doubt to allow her privacy—but with his creased brow, she knew he had heard. She shifted uncomfortably in her seat. “What do you mean, Mr. Whitham?”

“As you are aware,” the man continued, “your uncle accrued a great number of debts these last few years. I regret to say that, before his death, he had fallen dreadfully behind on his payments.”

“Payments?” She shook her head. “You must be mistaken, sir. My uncle funded the building of Golowduyn with his own living. No loan was used.”

Mr. Whitham paused. “No, I refer to the loans he had taken out to fund his gaming debts.”

“But my uncle does not game…did not game,” she corrected.

Mr. Whitham fiddled with the papers in his hand, his formality having disappeared. “Forgive me, Miss Moore, I thought you knew.”

Abigail fought the desire to cover her ears. He wasn’t speaking truthfully. He couldn’t be.

“The loans have come and gone at various times the last few years,” Mr. Whitham said, his voice lowered. “But last September, I understand he lost a substantial amount of money. The loan he signed for to pay the debt was very large, indeed. Unfortunately, it remains unpaid to this day, and the interest continues to accumulate.”

September. When Uncle Ellis had suffered his injury.

Had he been using what little money they had for gaming instead of paying someone to help her with the lighthouse? She did not wish to believe it, and yet, deep within her heart, she somehow knew the truth already.

Mr. Whitham extended a few papers toward her. “These are evidence of his deferring the loans.”

Abigail scanned the pages. Her uncle’s signature was scrawled at the bottom of each one. But she still did not understand when he could have found the time to game. He was at the lighthouse every night, apart from when he visited Mr. Craig.

The truth rushed over her in waves of realization. He had not been visiting with the apothecary for help with his wounds. He had been gaming, drinking, *lying*. He had taken their funds and wasted them away. He must have been the talk of the town, but of course she would not have heard it. She had been too busy taking care of the lighthouse—doing her work, *and* her uncle’s.

Images flashed through her mind. The times he’d wobbled to bed, stinking of smoke and drink. The late nights he’d had. The alcohol on his breath the night of his death. Had he been gaming then, too?

She glanced to Captain Kendricks. Concern clouded his dark eyes as he watched her in silence.

Why did she ask him to stay? Now her humiliation could not be hidden.

“Miss Moore,” Mr. Whitham said gingerly, “with these loans, in attempt to avoid debtor’s prison, Mr. Moore, despite our best efforts to convince him to do otherwise, mortgaged Golowduyn and the surrounding property.”

The brutal sting of betrayal hit Abigail as powerfully as if she had

been struck across her face. After everything she'd done—her work, her sacrifices, her countless sleepless nights—Uncle Ellis had simply agreed to give the lighthouse away?

"What is the extent of the loans, sir?" she asked. "What must I pay to keep Golowduyn?"

The banker kept his gaze level, though his shoulders tensed, as if to prepare himself for a strike. "Over three thousand pounds."

Abigail closed her eyes, swaying on the edge of the settee. "And when must it be paid?"

"The agreement states"—she heard him rifling through his papers—"that the mortgage must be paid in full within one year, this October. If left unsatisfied, the property will be seized."

She opened her eyes to stare once more at her uncle's name on the papers in her hands. "Could you not extend, sir?" She hated the tremor in her voice. "As I was unaware of his actions until this moment?"

"Forgive me, Miss Moore," Mr. Whitham said, his voice finally filling with sincere compassion, "but such a thing is not possible."

"Of course." She longed to lash out, to scream at the banker for being cruel and unfair. But she knew he was only the bearer of distressing, disturbing news. News her uncle should have told her. How could he have made her promise to keep Golowduyn when he already knew it was lost?

No, the banker did not deserve her anger.

Her uncle did.

"Thank you, Mr. Whitham, for coming here in person to inform me of such. I will be in contact with you shortly when I decide what is to be done."

What *was* to be done? Anything at all?

"I am truly sorry, Miss Moore," Mr. Whitham said, standing. With a tip of his hat, he left the room.

As the front door closed behind him, Abigail looked at the papers he had left with her.

"Miss Moore?"

Captain Kendricks. She couldn't look up at him. She couldn't bear to see the empathy that had most assuredly filled his dark eyes.

"Forgive me, Captain," she said, "but I…I must…"

Words failed her, tears spilled down her cheeks, and she ran to her room. She closed the door firmly behind her, relieved when she heard the front door open and close again, signaling the captain's departure. She felt alone, helpless, but she could not face him. She could not face anyone.

"What am I to do?" she asked herself.

She leaned against the door, no longer able to support herself.

The thought of losing Golowduyn, her home, pressed down heavily upon her heart.

She crinkled the loan documents within her fisted hand, gritting her teeth together before throwing the sheets across her room. Paper flew in every direction as she sank to the floor.

"Uncle, how could you?"

* * *

Gavin rode his horse along the seaside, rolling his head back to ease the tension in his neck—tension that had been there for nearly a week. He felt restless, hopeless. Lost.

After Mr. Moore's funeral and the discovery of the gentleman's debts, Gavin had racked his mind for a solution to Miss Moore's situation. He had longed to see what her thoughts were on the matter. But after that day, Gavin's time had been entirely taken up with Sanders's trial, which had finally taken place a few days after the service.

The guilty verdict had been expected, as well as the punishment of death by hanging. Even still, Sanders's younger brother had shouted expletives as the sentence had been read, threatening revenge on Gavin as he was dragged from the room.

Gavin still regarded the boy with sorrow, but after Miss Moore's prior words, his feelings of fault in the matter had substantially subsided.

Now if only he could help Miss Moore, as she had helped him—as she had *saved* him.

With a sigh, he looked out to the sea. A tall ship floated by on the bright water, far from the cliffsides, sails full as the wind drove it south.

It seemed a lifetime ago since he had commanded such a vessel. He did miss his life at sea. But now, he missed Golowduyn.

Staying with the Moores had given him a strange sense of belonging. As if he had finally found a home. So being away from them had brought back his uncertainty for what his future held.

His distance had also made him realize, that as much as he missed his time at Golowduyn, he missed the woman behind the lighthouse even more.

His desire to be near Miss Moore did not surprise him. The week he had stayed at Golowduyn—and the brief visits he'd been able to manage with Miss Moore since—had not been enough to satisfy his longing to get to know the woman further.

Yes, their relationship had been somewhat strained with her lack of trust in seemingly everyone. She seemed hesitant to share anything about her life, beyond her knowledge and love of the lighthouse. But

what reason had she to trust Gavin when her uncle, her caretaker, had treated her in such a way—before and after his death?

He shook the thoughts from his mind. He had struggled initially with his anger when he'd first heard of Mr. Moore leaving his debts to his niece. But berating the man's poor choices would hardly help matters.

The only thing that *would* help would be securing Miss Moore's future at the lighthouse.

Though, how that was supposed to happen, Gavin wasn't entirely sure.

He had visited Mr. Whitham in St. Ives after the trial had ended, asking if there was anything he could do to help Miss Moore keep her lighthouse.

"Short of paying the whole of Mr. Moore's debts," Mr. Whitham had said, "I fear there is nothing else to be done, sir."

Gavin had left the bankers with very little hope. He had no qualms about paying off the loans and mortgage, but he respected the woman too greatly to go about doing so behind her back. And if he asked her forthright if he could pay the debts, well, he hardly believed she would accept such an offer.

Even if she did, there was the small matter of Trinity House. He knew they would not accept an unmarried young woman as head keeper with no assistant.

And if she found an assistant, they would hardly approve of her working alongside a gentleman who was not next of kin, and finding another woman as strong as Miss Moore—as willing to give up her life in the service—was nearly impossible.

The matter was complicated, to say the least. Still, even with his reasons to remain in Cornwall disappearing one by one—the ship's wreckage cleaned, Mr. Moore's death, and the court martial completed—not to mention his desire to see his brother again, he found himself unable, *unwilling*, to leave.

At least, not until he had attempted to help Miss Moore in every way possible. He was indebted to her. After all, she had saved his life, at great peril to her own. The least he could do was attempt to do the same for her.

Only a coward would leave the woman now, in her time of need. Not a man of honor.

So he would offer to pay off her uncle's debts.

And if she refused, which he had no doubt that she would, then he would make his next offer—an offer that would allow her to keep Golowduyn.

An offer that involved far more than a simple, single payment. An offer he was more than ready to make.

Abigail tugged at another weed until it broke loose from the dirt. She threw it over her shoulder, not bothering to see if it reached the pile of others. She knelt down in the middle of her garden, moisture seeping in through her apron and skirts, but she didn't care. Her dress was already filthy. What did one more stain matter? She was a penniless lighthouse keeper; she may as well look the part.

With an exhausted sigh, she swiped the hair blowing across her cheek before digging her fingers back into the dirt. Since the funeral days before, she had worked tirelessly to prevent herself from dwelling on her uncle's sordid actions and her own hopeless state. She had gone through what little possessions she had in the house, writing down everything that would fetch a profit. She had not needed to add the figures to know she was nowhere near the sum required, even if she sold everything she owned.

She had begun to wonder if she ought to accept her fate, to live out the next few months saving every spare coin she could, and maybe a miracle would occur.

Either that, or she would enjoy the last of her freedom in her lighthouse before she was forced to relocate.

However, a letter from Trinity House arrived that very morning, informing her that if she wished to keep their contract with a monthly income sent for her work at the lighthouse, a different head keeper would need to be appointed.

Abigail knew they did not wish to fund a scandal waiting to happen—an unmarried keeper with a male assistant. But without their help, the light would remain lit only as long as her current supply of oil lasted. Mere weeks, at best.

How she regretted having no plan in place. When her uncle had fallen last autumn, she had become all too aware that he would one day die. But any plans made would not have mattered either way. They would have fallen apart with the mess her uncle had left her.

With a rumbling stomach, Abigail straightened, arching her back to work out the stiffness accrued from hours of work. She would not be weeding the pitiful patch of soil at all if she did not rely on the small amount of vegetables her garden yielded—the only food she could afford.

Perhaps she ought to enjoy the time she had left at Golowduyn. Take a walk on the beach, enjoy the sunsets. Anything would be more pleasant than working for nothing.

But then, she had never worked at the lighthouse for nothing. Her purpose had always been—would have *always* been—to keep safe the lives at sea.

She looked out to the deep blue water, but her eyes were drawn instead to Captain Kendricks on his black horse approaching her. Her

stomach lurched. She had not expected to see him that day. She knew the trial had already taken place, so his departure from Cornwall would be soon. He had nothing left to keep him there.

"Good morning, Captain Kendricks," she greeted, painfully aware of the weary tone to her voice. "I thought you would have left for your brother's already."

"I will be soon." He dismounted his horse and turned to face her, running the reins through his hands. "I could not leave yet. Not before I knew you were…well."

Of course he was there asking after her. That was just the sort of man he was. He was not like her uncle or her father. He was a true gentleman. And his continual helping hand caused a knot of emotion within in her throat.

"Thank you, Captain." She swallowed, standing from her kneeling position. "I assure you, I am well."

Her voice breaking in the middle of her words did not further her cause.

Captain Kendricks tied his horse to the garden fence and took a step toward her. "Miss Moore, I know you may misconstrue my offer of help, but I cannot continue in this regard, wondering what you are to do. I must ask, will you allow me to pay off your uncle's debts?"

Abigail had anticipated the words long ago. Her uncle had told her of the captain's wealth from his substantial living and his naval career. Still, the selfless generosity Captain Kendricks extended toward her caused her physical pain.

"I thank you, sir, but I cannot accept such an offer."

He did not seem surprised. Had he expected her refusal?

"May I ask why?" he questioned.

"For a number of reasons," she replied. "Because it is your fortune, and they are my uncle's debts. Because I could never repay such a sum. And because…Trinity House will not allow me to run the lighthouse on my own."

He was silent, seemingly contemplating her words. "Then you are going to leave? You are going to leave Golowduyn?"

She looked at him with an expression she was sure reflected perfectly her miserable state. "What else am I to do?"

A fresh wave of humiliation overcame her. She was ashamed for having such an uncle, for having no money, for having no one else to help her. Her life was bleak, her future even more so, and there was nothing she could do to help it.

"You have, I believe, one more option."

"Forgive me, sir, but I do not think that I do."

"You do," he pressed. "Miss Moore, there is another way for you to keep the lighthouse."

She tilted her head, wondering at his persistence. “And what way is that, Captain?”

His eyes did not waver. “You can marry…me.”

A dizziness overcame her. “Sir?”

He took a step toward her. “You can marry me,” he repeated.

“No, you…you cannot be serious.”

“I am.”

The man had clearly taken leave of his senses. And yet, as he walked toward her, taking her hand in his, she could not deny the look of determination on his face. Her heart fluttered, preventing her from drawing in a deep breath.

“Marry me, Miss Moore,” he said softly, “so we may work together to keep Golowduyn lit.”

Her thoughts spun rapidly, adding to her light-headedness. What was he saying—that he would give up everything to remain at the lighthouse with her? She could not allow him to do such a thing.

“Captain, forgive me, but I cannot accept your offer.”

“Yes, you can,” he said. His dark eyes were clear, focused. As if he knew exactly what he offered—and was content to do so. “I will not force you into accepting, but I have considered what options you may have, and I truly believe this is the only way in which you may receive everything you wish.”

Her mouth parted. He *was* in earnest. She could hardly wrap her mind around what had just occurred. Captain Kendricks had just offered his hand in marriage…to *her*.

Heat rose up her neck, settling on her cheeks. No, she had to be reasonable about this. He had clearly not made the offer out of love. It was more of a kind gesture, even a business proposition—so she would treat it as such.

A marriage between them certainly would sort out the issue with Trinity House and provide her with the help she needed to run the lighthouse. Indeed, her troubles would be over financially. But then, what about the captain?

“But, sir,” she began, her voice small as his thumb caressed the top of her hand, “what of your own life, the sacrifices you would have to make if we…if we went through with this?”

“The only thing I would truly be giving up,” he said, “is a life of uncertainty. I told you before, I did not know what I would do after leaving the navy, short of returning to my brother’s estate. And I assure you, I would gladly give up a life surrounded by land, finery, and elevated circumstances to live here.”

His eyes swept across the grounds, the lighthouse, the sea. Abigail could see the clear admiration in his expression, for it matched her own. He had fallen in love with Golowduyn. How had it taken her so

long to see it?

Too easily could she picture her life with him. When she was a young girl, she had longed to find a handsome man she could marry. Together, they would live out the rest of their days in the lighthouse. As she grew older, however, she knew her imaginings were silly. Yet, there she was, being offered the chance to live out her childhood dreams with a gentleman, a captain—and more importantly, a friend.

She looked down at her hand still in the captain's. How naturally they fit together. How her heart, her very soul, thrilled at his touch.

But when she noted the dirt beneath her fingernails, the truth of who she really was severed her hopes and her dreams.

Yes, Captain Kendricks was a gentleman. And she could not allow him to spend the rest of his days doing manual labor. Nor could she allow him to marry a woman with such a complicated and sordid past.

She took a step away from him, pulling her fingers from his grasp, and a coldness enveloped her, rushing through her body with an irrepressible wave. "I cannot, Captain."

"Why can you not, Miss Moore?" he asked. "If you have reservations because you assume that…that I will expect what normally takes place within a marriage, please, don't. Our relationship can be purely platonic. I would expect nothing but friendship."

A blush flamed her cheeks, her hands still tingling from his touch. She must not have had the same effect on him if he could make such a promise without hesitation. Yet, when she stared into his eyes, the small flicker of uncertainty in their brown depths made her heart quicken.

"So, Miss Moore," he said, clearing his throat, "what is your answer?"

His deep voice nearly penetrated the defenses she had strived to build since the man had crashed upon her shores. But she could not think about that day, nor the time they had spent together since. She could not dwell on her attraction to him any longer. She could not imagine how wonderful her life would be married to such a man.

Because he deserved a far better wife than a poor, deceased lighthouse keeper's niece.

She turned away from him, dropping down to her knees in the dirt. "I am sorry, Captain. I cannot marry you."

His eyes seared through her flesh, but she could not face him again. She could not allow him to see the tears falling from her eyes, sprinkling the weeds below.

She dug through the dirt—where Captain Kendricks did not belong—and pulled at the weeds until she heard him mount his horse and ride away without a word.

And she prayed that she would soon overcome the regret she

already felt for rejecting the one man who had ever truly been on her side.

* * *

Abigail stared at her hands folded in her lap. She sat across from the banker in a small room in the inn, overlooking the streets of St. Just. A breeze blew in through the open window, rippling the sheer curtains and filling the room with fresh air.

But Abigail felt nauseated, lifeless—a mere shadow of who she had been before.

"Thank you for coming to meet me here, Mr. Whitham," she said.

"Of course, Miss Moore."

"I requested your presence here to inform you that I do not have the resources to pay off the mortgage. Nor will I in October."

"I am sorry to hear that."

She could not swallow the emotion binding her throat. "What will become of Golowduyn?"

"We have had several prospective gentlemen interested in purchasing the land, but nothing will be settled until the documents are in order. Of course, the fate of the lighthouse will be in the hands of whoever pays the highest price."

She knew having a gentleman purchase Golowduyn was inevitable, but to hear it aloud—that her greatest fears were coming true—caused her to chest to constrict. She stood, making her way to the window to push it farther open. The hinges squeaked in protest. She closed her eyes as the wind played with the soft curls at her temples.

"You look ill, Miss Moore," Mr. Whitham said, remaining behind his desk. "Allow me to pour you a drink."

Abigail heard the trickling of brandy as it fell into the glass behind her, but she did not turn around.

This was not supposed to happen. None of this was supposed to have ever happened. She was meant to keep Golowduyn, to grow old there, have her posterity do the same.

She could not blame her uncle any longer. He had started it, yes—but she had ended it with a simple, misguided refusal.

Why had she not accepted Captain Kendricks's offer?

"I know of a few workhouses in search of females," Mr. Whitham continued. "You would be required to move farther north, though. If you prefer to remain in Cornwall, however, might I suggest finding employment as a maid of all work, or a scullery maid?"

Abigail opened her eyes, staring down at the busy street. She remained unnoticed, as if the world was intentionally trying to squeeze her out. People walked past with bright faces as they greeted

neighbors and friends, a sea of tall hats and elegant bonnets, fine carriages and wrapped packages—none of them aware, none of them caring about her destitute state.

None of them…apart from Captain Gavin Kendricks.

The blood pulsed through her veins as she watched him ride up the busy street. He had not left St. Just then?

Her heart jumped. She was not too late. She could have a life outside of a workhouse and away from meaningless labor on an ostentatious estate. She could remain in Cornwall, forever more at Golowduyn, with a man by her side willing it give up everything—for her to *have* everything.

She caught sight of the full saddle bags behind him, and a panic erupted within her.

"Captain?" She stuck her head through the window, hardly noticing the startled looks from those below. "Captain Kendricks!"

He looked over his shoulder, scanning the streets for the source of the voice.

She waved her hand back and forth. "Captain Kendricks, up here!"

Finally, he found her, a bewildered look on his face. He returned her wave and reined in his horse. She motioned for him to join her downstairs, and he nodded, though he still eyed her with confusion.

Swiftly, Abigail pulled her head from the window to see Mr. Whitham watching her as if she were mad.

Perhaps she was mad—mad enough to accept the captain's offer, mad enough to marry a man she had known for mere weeks. But if being mad meant she could remain in her home, continue to watch over the seas nearby, and take care of Golowduyn forever, then mad she would be.

"Excuse me for a moment, Mr. Whitham," she said in her calmest voice. "I will join you directly with…with my intended."

"Your what?" he exclaimed.

But she had already fled from the room. She took the stairs two at a time, well aware of how unladylike she appeared. Her dress was spotted with stains that would not rub out, and her hair was a right mess, lopsided and already falling out of its pins. But she did not care. She needed to speak with Captain Kendricks.

She reached the door just as he entered the inn, his eyes falling upon her in an instant.

"Captain," she spoke, breathless. She glanced around them, noting the eyes of more than a few others who focused on them rather than on their forgotten meals. "Are you available to speak for a moment?"

He nodded silently. They moved to an unoccupied corner of the

room.

"What is it, Miss Moore?"

Her courage waned like a flame in a storm.

Did his offer still stand? Or was he set on leaving Cornwall to return to his brother?

Before her nerve could fail altogether, she pressed on. "Sir, if your offer still stands, I…I should like to accept it."

His brow rose, but his voice did not reveal the same surprise. "May I ask what has changed your decision?"

She drew in a deep breath before rushing on with a simple, truthful explanation. "I realized I would be even more of a fool than my uncle if I chose living in a workhouse over a life with you at Golowduyn."

His gaze flickered between her eyes, as if he attempted to discover her thoughts, so she ducked her head. "What have you to say, sir?" She raised one shoulder, wincing as she anticipated his denial.

"I say…let us save Golowduyn together."

Her eyes flew up to see his softened expression, the corner of his mouth curved up. Relief rushed throughout her, causing an unsteady feeling in her limbs. "Thank you, Captain," she sputtered.

But before she could fully clasp her hope, a disparaging thought hauled it away from her grasp. Her eyes dropped once more, and she laced her fingers together in front of her so tightly, they ached. "Before we go any further, sir, there is something you must know… something about my past."

But he waved a soft hand between them. "If you desire to tell me something, then you may do so. But I require no confessions or promises to be made before we marry."

Her eyebrows drew together. "But what if your decision to marry me changes once you hear what I have to say?"

"Does it make you think any less of yourself?"

"No, but others might."

"Then you may keep it to yourself," he said, "until you are ready to share it."

She shifted her feet. "Are you certain, sir?"

"There is nothing you can say that would change my mind."

And when she finally looked up to see his stalwart gaze, a small thread of hope managed to slip through the thick uncertainty covering her heart.

"Very well, Captain," she said. "Then let us marry with haste."

Chapter Seven

With Trinity House's insistence on a male head keeper to run Golowduyn, Captain Kendricks had suggested they look into purchasing a common license the moment the debts had been paid. They could not risk waiting three weeks for the banns to posted before they could marry.

Their wedding took place a week after they received the license. Abigail wore her blue Sunday dress—the only one not riddled with holes. Mr. Biddle, the vicar, married them, while his wife and Lieutenant Harris stood as witnesses.

Abigail had told Captain Kendricks to invite whomever he pleased, though she was relieved when he'd said he wanted a small ceremony as much as she did.

People would discover their union soon enough. There was certainly no reason to hasten the stares and whispers that would bombard them afterwards.

During the ceremony, Abigail hardly heard the vicar as he read from *The Book of Common Prayer*. She was too distracted with the fact that she was, indeed, marrying the handsome captain who stood beside her.

After the vows, scriptures, and prayers had been said, the vicar finished, and Abigail signed the parish registry in a daze. She thanked the Biddles and the lieutenant for their attendance, then followed her new husband out of the church.

Their journey back to Golowduyn was spent in silence. An odd sort of tension arose between them, a tension not based on anger, but on uncertainty concerning their new relationship. After all, she could think of no other marriage that began with a husband paying off his wife's uncle's debts—and ended with an agreement to run a lighthouse together, though they'd known each other for mere weeks.

But then, perhaps only *she* felt the discomfort, and Captain Kendricks was fine? He certainly appeared well enough, what with his

pleasant expression as he peered out over the sea.

She pursed her lips. She would be fine soon, she was sure of it. She merely needed time to adjust.

But when they reached the lighthouse, matters worsened. Her new life glared right before her eyes as she and Captain Kendricks stood alone in the hallway of Golowduyn.

She fidgeted, looking anywhere else but at him as he regarded her curiously. She did not know what to say, what to do. It was as if she had lost all ability to behave as a normal person, simply because they were now married.

"I…" she began, crossing her arm in front of her stomach, "I think I will go change now." And she darted down the hallway before the captain even had a chance to respond.

She closed her bedroom door swiftly behind her, leaning against it with a deep sigh. She was behaving ridiculously. She and the captain had been friends before all of this, so why could that not continue? Why did she feel the need to flee, to escape his presence? Nothing had changed between them.

Then again, everything had changed between them. Captain Kendricks was no longer her uncle's guest in her home. He was her husband in *their* home. He had paid off her uncle's debts. He had sacrificed everything for her to remain at Golowduyn.

So how *could* they continue just as before?

His footsteps thumped against the floor outside of her door as he entered his own room, no doubt to change, as well. A sudden thought popped into her head. If she finished dressing, perhaps she could begin her chores before the captain even left his room. Work would certainly distract her. It always did.

With renewed hope, Abigail threw off her Sunday best and pulled on her brown working dress. Within a matter of moments, she had changed and moved to open her door.

As she did so, the captain's door opened simultaneously, and they both took a step forward, stopping just before they would have bumped into each other.

"Oh," she gasped, pulling back.

"Forgive me," he said. "I did not mean to startle you."

She shook her head, resting a hand to her chest. "It is quite all right."

"Have you already forgotten that I live here?"

She looked up at him, his brown eyes dancing, and she flushed. "No, I…you merely surprised me, that is all."

He quirked his eyebrow and motioned for her to precede him down the hallway. She moved forward with a nod of thanks. But when his boots sounded directly behind—and she sensed his eyes upon her

—she suddenly forgot how to walk. Her right foot collided with the left, and she tumbled forward.

If tripping in front of Captain Kendricks had not been mortifying enough, having his hands wrap around her waist to catch her from behind certainly was.

“Are you all right?” he asked, his deep voice filled with concern.

She nodded. Her sides burned pleasantly where his fingers held her. “Yes.” She straightened, groaning inwardly at her inability to walk.

Was she a toddler on unstable ground? A newborn foal upon the hay?

No, she was a woman who was unsettled when her husband’s alluring eyes were upon her.

Taking a careful step forward, she pulled away from Captain Kendricks, despite her strange desire to linger within his hold.

She knew his eyes would be upon her even more so, in case she decided to trip over herself again, so she turned there in the hallway to face him.

That was another mistake. Now her legs turned to preserves at the sight of his firmly set jaw and masculine lips.

She had meant to distract herself with something. What had it been? Oh, yes, work. To work anywhere she could not see the captain.

“You must be hungry, sir,” she said. “Why do you not take a moment to rest in the sitting room while I make up a plate for you?”

He gave her an incredulous look. “We did not form this union for me to rest while you toil away. I enjoy working, as you well know. So please, tell me what needs to be done, and I will see to the tasks straightaway.”

She hesitated. She had hoped some of her guilt over the captain’s sacrifices might have been alleviated had she worked while he rested. But if there was one thing she knew about the captain, it was his insatiable desire to help others.

Of course, there were worse traits for a husband to have.

“Very well,” she said. “The stable doors have come off again, so you may fix them if you wish. I’m certain the horses would appreciate proper shelter for once.”

“Excellent,” he said. “I will see to it directly.”

He walked away with quick, excited steps. Abigail stared after him until the door closed behind him. Instantly, silence encompassed her, deafening her ears.

Her plan had worked too well. She had only suggested that he fix the stables so he might work out of doors—away from herself. She had hoped the distance would have cleared her mind, distracted her from her discomfort. But now, all she wished for was to be near the captain

once again, to be rid of the silence that had been her closest companion since her uncle's death.

Her conflicting feelings only worsened as she walked from room to room, moved from chore to chore, unable to focus on anything other than Captain Kendricks—who she observed working away at the stables from each window she happened by.

She fancied her lack of focus was due to her desire to work out of doors, like the captain. After all, it was a beautiful day. She ought to enjoy the sunshine while it lasted. Never mind the captain's presence out there. She could overlook him. She would simply work better with fresh air in her lungs.

With a broom in hand, she exited the house, casting a furtive glance toward the stables as she did so.

Captain Kendricks looked up at her and raised a hand in greeting.

Was she imagining things, or did he look pleased to see her? She sent him a quick smile in response before sweeping the landing.

She had managed two swipes of her broom before she glanced up again. Captain Kendricks hammered with his right hand, his left hand holding the door steady. His grasp was strong. His wound must have healed nicely.

With his sleeves rolled up, she could see his lower arm flexing as he hammered, and an involuntary sigh escaped her lips.

He certainly was robust. And she certainly was distracted.

A flash of color nearby pulled her attention away from the captain, and she looked ahead with narrowed eyes. A shrill tweet pierced the air before something small and blue swooped directly over her head.

She ducked down with a scream.

Captain Kendricks jogged toward her. "What happened? Are you all right?"

She straightened. "Yes, only I…I think a bird just flew into the house."

She peered within the open doorway. Captain Kendricks moved to stand by her side.

"Yes, you see there?" she said, pointing to the hallway that led to the circular room. Perched on the window ledge was a small, blue swallow. "We need to capture him before he has the chance to—"

But the bird kicked off the ledge and soared toward the spiral stairs, instantly disappearing up the tower.

The creature was no doubt halfway to the watch room by now. They would never…

"Oh, no," she breathed.

"What" Captain Kendricks questioned, but she was already racing for the stairs.

“The latch door,” she explained over her shoulder. “I don’t remember closing it this morning. If the bird flies into the lamp room, he’ll scratch the windows, the lamps. He might even fly under the refractors’ covers. We need to capture him. Immediately!”

Captain Kendricks did not respond, but his footsteps sounded in time with hers on the iron stairs.

With her hand on the railing to keep her balance, Abigail craned her neck to see the chirping bird circling above them, moving higher and higher up the tower.

How could she not have remembered to close the door? Or had she? Her memories refused to cooperate. She had received very little sleep over the past week, due to the continual stormy weather—as well as the added stress of her impending nuptials—so she could not recall the truth.

She looked up again, willing the creature to stop its ascent, but when it disappeared into the watch room, she gritted her teeth.

“All will be well,” Captain Kendricks said behind her. “We will capture it before any damage is done.”

His voice was sure, but she wasn’t.

Finally, they reached the last step, and Abigail stopped, breathing heavily as she held her aching side. She glanced to the captain behind her and pressed a finger to her lips.

He nodded his understanding.

As soon as her breathing evened out, she crept forward on the tips of her toes. The last thing she wanted to do was startle the bird into the lamp room—if he wasn’t already there.

As slowly as she could manage, she peered through the doorway.

Before seeking out the bird, she looked to the ceiling, and relief pulsed through her veins.

She pulled back with a sigh, closing her eyes. “It’s all right. I closed the latch door after all.”

“What a relief,” Captain Kendricks said between breaths. “However, next time, would you mind very much attempting to remember *before* we have to race up one hundred and seventeen steps?”

She looked to his eyes alight with teasing, and a strange thrill coasted through her chest. “I will try, so long as you help me to capture him now.”

He walked past her to stare within the room. “How do you suggest we do that?”

She leaned through the doorway, as well. The bird stood on the railing of the smaller set of stairs.

Thank goodness the latch had been closed.

She perused the rest of the room for anything that might aid in

their venture. The windows were sealed closed to prevent drafts in the lamp room, so simply letting the sparrow free was not an option. They would have to catch him with something. But what?

Her eyes fell upon the tattered blanket draped across the cot. “I suppose we can use that,” she suggested, pointing to the gray cover.

Captain Kendricks nodded in agreement. He took a step within the room, and Abigail followed behind him a safe distance, using his body as a shield.

“Close the door behind you,” he said softly.

As she did so, the bird took flight. Abigail ducked with a scream that sounded remarkably similar to the sparrow’s shrieking overhead. She backed up against the closed door. Captain Kendricks snatched the blanket and a pillow from the cot before moving to her side.

“The bird is mad,” she spat out.

“Here,” he said, extending the pillow to her with a look of amusement, “use this to keep him to one side of the room. I’ll see if I cannot capture him with the blanket.”

“Very well.”

Slowly, they approached the bird flapping frantically against the wall. Captain Kendricks held the blanket in his hands level with his chest while Abigail raised the pillow to just below her eyes.

“Steady now,” the captain murmured.

Abigail wondered if he spoke to the bird or himself as he moved forward, one small step at a time. When the sparrow dove toward them, she screamed again, covering her mouth as the captain dropped to the floor.

“You are right,” he said, scrambling back to stand near the wall, “he is mad.”

Their eyes met, and suddenly, the humor of the situation struck her. She began to laugh, and the captain joined in with chuckles of his own.

“All right,” he said after a moment, “let us attempt this once more.”

But his efforts continued over and over as he tossed the blanket forth, only to have the sparrow continually dodge out of its way. Abigail did very little to help the situation. She could not contain her laughter, hiding behind the pillow as the bird circled the room.

“Keep him over this way,” the captain instructed through his laughs.

“I can’t!” she cried out, using the pillow as a protection rather than to guide the bird to one side of the room. “He will attack me again.”

“You? He’s been attacking me!”

Another toss of the blanket, another scream from Abigail, and

more laughter erupted, until finally, the captain's blanket landed on the sprightly creature.

"You did it!" she exclaimed, tossing the pillow aside and clapping her hands together.

His eyes were bright as he looked at her. In a single swoop, he gathered the blanket and the chirping bird carefully in his hands.

"Quickly now," he said, "before he hurts himself."

They moved down the stairs and through the house with the bird flapping uncontrollably within the blanket. When they finally reached outside, Abigail closed the door securely behind them and joined Captain Kendricks in front of the house. He settled the blanket on the grass, gently moving two folds of the fabric before taking a step back.

The bird moved from one end to the other before bursting forth from the blanket into the sky with joyful chirps. He sailed easily toward the lighthouse, circling around the building with ease.

Abigail released a slow breath through her pursed lips. "I did not think he would live through that."

"I did not think *we* would live through that," he countered with a wink.

Her cheeks warmed. The sparrow's song reached her ears again as she watched the animals lively flight across the sea.

"Thank you, Captain," she said. "I could not have captured him myself."

"It was my pleasure. But…you do not have to call me that any longer. It is Gavin, if you wish it."

Her heart thumped against her chest, her breathing hitched. "Then you may call me Abigail."

As their eyes met, the discomfort she had felt before dissipated. They were friends, after all. Of course, their situation would take some getting used to, but she would grow accustomed to it soon, she was sure. How could she not, with someone so accommodating and helpful as her husband? Perhaps it was time for her to be more accommodating, as well.

"Well," she said, clearing her throat, "I will leave you to see to the stable doors. Excuse me."

She made it only a few steps forward before she turned to face him again. "Would you like to join me this evening as I refill the lamps?"

His eyebrows raised. "I would love to, Abigail."

She had never liked the sound of her name as much as she did in that moment. She nodded toward him with a tip of her head before turning toward the house with a lightened step and a lasting grin on her lips.

* * *

Abigail awoke the next morning feeling more refreshed than she could ever remember. She had not received any more sleep than usual, but with the captain—with *Gavin*—by her side the previous night in the watch room, she had begun to feel hopeful. Her days of exhaustion and loneliness were finally coming to an end.

They had spent their wedding night climbing stairs, refilling oil, and tending to lamps, comfortably conversing before departing for their individual rooms. She had certainly not expected anything else to occur. After all, they had vowed to maintain a platonic relationship before they had even obtained their license to wed. Their decision was certainly not traditional, but then…neither was their marriage.

They began another day of work together, but Abigail struggled with her shame as Gavin helped her tidy up the lighthouse that had been neglected for weeks. Yet, with his cheerful attitude and willingness to help, her embarrassment faded away.

Instead of avoiding him as she had done before, Abigail worked alongside him as they tended to the garden for the first few hours of the morning.

Afterward, when she attempted to join him the stables, however, he held up his hand to stop her. “You are welcome to see to the horses still, of course,” he said. “But I must ask you to leave the mucking out to my care. I cannot bear the thought of you cleaning up after the animals any longer.”

Abigail was surprised to discover she felt more protected and valued than restricted. As such, she readily agreed to his request.

After the stalls were cleaned, Gavin tacked up his horse and led him outside. “You are certain you do not wish to join me?” he asked.

“No, I’ve more chores to see to here.”

Her words were true, but that was not the real reason she did not wish to accompany him to St. Just. After all, she should be with him to make the necessary purchases of food and supplies that Golowduyn had been severely lacking for all too long. But she could not stomach the thought of happening upon anyone who might have heard about their marriage. At least, not yet.

The obligatory pleasantries, thinly veiled questions, and inquiring eyes would be too much for Abigail to handle while she was growing used to her marriage herself.

She waved goodbye to Gavin, returning indoors only when he disappeared around the ridge. Wandering aimlessly about the house, she pushed aside the strange notion that she missed him. After all, she had spent all morning and the previous day with him. She could not possible miss him after that. Could she?

To distract herself from her confusion, Abigail set about straightening the sitting room.

She opened the windows first thing, then knelt on the floor as she organized the worn books on the small shelf at the side of the room. She had only just begun to tuck in the torn spines and loose pages when a knock sounded at the door.

"Who can that be?" she asked herself.

She stood, taking only a single step before two women's voices from the window reached her ear. Her breathing shallowed.

The Stedmans had not come to Golowduyn in years, ever since Uncle Ellis had rejected Mrs. Stedman. But Abigail could certainly guess as to why the women appeared at her door then. Avoiding speaking with others about her marriage would be more difficult than she had expected.

The voices continued, and she crept closer to the window. All she could see were the tips of their pink and lavender gowns gently flowing in the breeze.

"Why did we come here, Mama?" Miss Stedman whined in a whisper. "Miss Moore despises us. She will not answer the door."

"She despises everyone, my dear," Mrs. Stedman returned softly.

Her words pierced through the wall Abigail had built around her heart. They were not true. Just because she preferred staying in the comfort and safety of Golowduyn—rather than out in Society—did not mean she disliked everyone.

Although, Miss Stedman's assumption had been correct. She did despise the two of them.

"We mustn't allow her primitive nature to intimidate us into ending our acquaintance with Captain Kendricks," Mrs. Stedman continued. "He is a gentleman. He should not have to pay for the sins of his purported wife."

"Sins? What do you mean, Mama?"

Abigail's brow furrowed, a sickness rising in her throat. Did Mrs. Stedman know of Abigail's past? If she did, she would not hesitate to tell her daughter. The woman was undoubtedly trying to make Abigail sound worse than she was. Typical.

"Never you mind," Mrs. Stedman replied. Her knock sounded at the door again. "We must simply help the captain realize his mistake in marrying the woman. It should not prove difficult, as their marriage is founded entirely upon charity."

Abigail pulled back. Gavin had assured her that others need not know the reasoning behind their marriage. For all intents and purposes, they had done so out of love. But she would be daft, indeed, if she did not think the rumors would eventually surface. She had no doubt that Mrs. Stedman had started them herself.

The woman continued. “You must simply show how amiable you are, my dear,” she told her daughter. “And If we remain by the captain’s side long enough, he shall turn to you for comfort when he yearns for the happiness he cannot find within the confines of Golowduyn.”

A blow landed to Abigail’s stomach. The woman could not be serious.

“But, Mother,” came Miss Stedman’s surprised words, “I know you wished for me to form an attachment with him before, as did I, but he is married now. Does this not change—”

“Hush, Constance,” Mrs. Stedman scolded in a vehement whisper. “An unhappy union can hardly be considered a marriage.”

“But will my reputation not be tarnished for pursuing a man who is already attached?”

“Not if we do so inconspicuously.”

“And if Captain Kendricks does accept me, will he not be frowned upon for leaving his wife?”

Mrs. Stedman’s short, cold laugh slid down Abigail’s back in a shiver. “No one would blame him if he *did* leave her.”

There was a pause before her daughter spoke again. “I don’t understand why I cannot find another gentleman more suited to me. Why must I still pursue the captain?”

“Because it is our duty as respectable ladies to ensure he is happily settled.”

Abigail didn’t believe the words for a single moment. She knew why the woman pressed her daughter toward Gavin. It was the same reasoning behind everything. She despised Abigail and wished for her unhappiness. It was as simple as that.

“This hardly seems proper, Mother.”

“Proper? What is proper is purely dictated by…”

Their voices muffled, and Abigail was no longer able to make out their words. She backed away from the window.

Mrs. Stedman had never liked her. The things she had said about Abigail behind Uncle Ellis’s back—complaints against her gaudy red hair and her ugly, freckled complexion—had scarred Abigail’s childhood.

But she was no longer a child.

Those memories were, indeed, etched permanently within her mind, but she did not have to add any more of their writing onto her soul.

As they knocked again, Abigail moved through the house with a determined step. She would open that door for one reason—to expel the women from her property and demand they never return.

“Miss Moore,” Mrs. Stedman greeted as they came face-to-face.

“Good morning.”

Abigail stared with a hardened expression. “My name is Mrs. Kendricks.”

The mother and daughter exchanged glances.

“So it is,” Mrs. Stedman said. “You must forgive my mistake. After all, we have only just learned of your marriage. Indeed, we were surprised to hear of it. And pleased, of course.”

Abigail ignored the woman’s feigned sweetness. “You will be disappointed to discover that you have made the journey here for nothing, as my husband is away at the moment.”

Mrs. Stedman hid her discontent well as her daughter merely picked at the red ribbon of her reticule.

“Oh, we have not come to call upon the captain alone, have we Constance?” Mrs. Stedman said.

“No, Mother.”

“Then allow me to disappoint you further,” Abigail said, folding her arms. “I am unavailable, as well, to accept your call.”

Mrs. Stedman’s brows arched. “Indeed? Well, I am sorry to hear that. Perhaps we may call at a more convenient time?”

Abigail’s insides burned at the thought of them calling when Gavin would actually be present. That would certainly put Mrs. Stedman’s plans into action.

Unless, of course, Abigail could end the woman’s tactics before they even began.

“We will be far too busy to take social calls for the foreseeable future,” she said bluntly. “I hope you understand.”

Miss Stedman shifted uncomfortably upon the landing. Mrs. Stedman’s eyes flashed before her thin lips stretched into a smile. “I see. Well, do give our best to the captain.”

Abigail made no response. She would have slammed the door directly in their faces, had she not wished to ensure they left her property.

The Stedmans curtsied and made their way down the short steps, but Mrs. Stedman turned back to her. “Oh, I nearly forgot.” She opened her reticule and produced a small note. “An invitation to our dinner party taking place in a fortnight. I understand you are beholden to your little lighthouse. But do remember, *both* of you need not come.”

She extended the invitation with an innocent smile.

Abigail considered taking the note and slapping it across the woman’s face. But she merely snatched it from her fingers and withdrew inside.

She closed the door behind her and headed straight for the sitting room, where she flung the invitation into the embers without

hesitation. The edges curled against the smoldering logs until a single, orange flame blossomed on the front of the paper.

Abigail had never been to a dinner party before. And she would certainly not have the Stedman's be her first.

"They will not step foot in this house again," she said as the writing on the invitation, Gavin's last name—*her* last name—was swallowed in the flame. "Nor I in theirs."

At the sound of an approaching horse, Abigail made for the door, wondering if Gavin had seen the Stedman's departing carriage. But she stepped outside to find not the captain, but a postman.

He reined in his snorting horse pawing at the ground and extended a letter toward her. She walked down the steps and retrieved it with a grateful nod.

The postman rode away in a gallop as Abigail eyed the letter with curiosity. The postage had been pre-paid, and the letter was addressed to both herself and Gavin.

She turned the correspondence over to where the crest of Trinity House was pressed into the wax.

The establishment must have received her letter, informing them that she and Gavin would be married, and decided to send a congratulatory note.

She broke the seal and read the letter.

Captain and Mrs. Kendricks,

We are pleased to hear the news of your recent engagement and look forward to having the captain join our rank of head keepers. We are also pleased to see the strides you have both taken to ensure the success of Golowduyn Lighthouse.

However, as Mrs. Kendricks will be aware, after years of working alongside us, certain requirements must be met in order for our agreement to continue. Upon our last visit a few months past, we noted a number of things that had been grossly neglected. For your convenience, we have included a list of items that must be kept up to our high standards. This list will need to be completed in two weeks' time. If it is not, Trinity House will have no choice but to forfeit your contract between us.

You may expect a representative to arrive in a fortnight to inspect your work. Until then, we wish you well in your endeavors.

Sincerely,
Mr. Philips of Trinity House

With a sinking feeling, Abigail poured over the list provided them. Most of the items included the general upkeep of the lighthouse.

The property required trimmed grass, tidy grounds and gardens, and mended fences. The house itself needed fresh paint and new windows. The list was more extensive when referring to inside, covering everything from clean hearths and newly painted walls to fixed floorboards and well-kept furniture.

The task was impossible. They would hardly be able to order most of the necessary supplies—glass for the windows, slate for the roof, new tools—in the time allotted. There was no possible way they could accomplish what was required of them, as well as looking after the lamps every night and through every storm.

So what were they to do? With the list in-hand, her arm dropped to her side, and she stared up at the lighthouse. Nothing, nothing could be done. She had known the requirements from the beginning, and she had fallen short of them.

She swallowed hard.

The lighthouse was supposed to be safe. Her new life with Gavin was supposed to be simple. And yet, nothing was. Not while she still suffered with consequences of her uncle's choices, consequences that spread their invading fingers through her life like a disease.

She wondered, yet again, if she would ever be free of the man she had refused to think about since discovering his debts, the man who had promised so much—and had delivered so little.

* * *

Gavin rushed home from St. Just, anxious to share with Abigail the good news he'd received while in town. After brushing down his horse, he entered the house and called out to her.

"I'm in the kitchen," she softly responded.

He followed the sound of her voice to find her kneading a wad of dough on the kitchen table, her back turned toward him.

"There you are," he said with a cheerful smile. "I have exciting news that I believe you will be pleased to hear."

"Oh?"

His smile faltered with her less than enthusiastic response. "Are you all right?"

"Of course," she responded. She sounded fine enough, but when she sniffed, he paused.

Was she…crying?

"Abigail?" He moved to her side, but she ducked her head, a few stray curls falling across her temples. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing, I assure you." Her voice broke.

He couldn't understand it. What on earth happened while he was away?

"Did you order what you needed?" she asked, clearing her throat.

He hesitated changing subjects. After all, he needed to know what was wrong with her in order to help her.

"Yes, I believed I remembered everything," he replied. "And…did you finish the chores that needed seeing to?"

"Nearly." She lifted the dough from the table and slapped it back down. "The Stedmans called while you were away."

Understanding finally dawned. Gavin recalled the conversation he'd had with Abigail long ago, when she'd ridden away from him after seeing the Stedmans in St. Just. It was clear there was a great animosity between her and the women. Though, he still could not comprehend why.

But if Abigail was in tears, then surely something terrible had happened.

"How long did they stay?" he asked.

She pressed her knuckles into the dough. "Only a moment. After they left, a letter arrived. From Trinity House."

He narrowed his eyes. So the Stedmans had *not* upset her—Trinity House had? He rubbed his jaw. "What did they have to say?"

She motioned to the spot on the table next to her, though she did not stop her kneading. He noticed for the first time a large, leather-bound book and a stack of papers resting nearby.

"The letter is there if you care to read it," she said, her voice becoming apathetic. Her tears had dried, though her eyes were still red. "Though I can summarize it for you, if you'd rather I do that."

He stood beside her, eying her warily as he picked up the creased paper on top of the others.

He quickly scanned the words as she spoke.

"They said we must complete the list they have enclosed within a fortnight," she began, her fingers digging into the mixture, "or we must forfeit our contract with Trinity House."

Gavin's eyebrows lowered. How could Trinity House give them an ultimatum, despite knowing Abigail's previous plight with her uncle and lack of help?

He eyed the extensive list provided for them, shaking his head in disbelief. No one could complete so many tasks in that short a time, not even with an entire household to help.

"I will write to them straightaway," he said. "We must request more time."

But Abigail shook her head, rolling her palms across the dough with vigor. "No, they will not extend the deadline."

His frustration grew. He had more than enough money to fund the lighthouse for years, even with no extra wages coming in. He had a mind to sever the agreement himself before Trinity House had the chance.

But to work with no oil provided and no pay apart from the occasional gratuity from passing sailors—it would be silly. He did not like the thought of working with an establishment who extended impossible demands, but it would be far wiser to remain in good standing with Trinity House.

So then, what were they to do?

He paused, and Abigail's resolute words finally sank in from earlier.

"They will not extend the deadline," she had said.

How did she know they would not allow them more time?

He glanced toward her as she worked the dough harder. Her jaw was clenched, her lips pursed.

"Abigail?" he said softly.

She did not look up.

"Abigail, please. Stop."

Finally, she paused, her arms straight, hands resting atop the dough. "I found documents…of my uncle's."

An uneasy feeling crept upon him. "What documents?"

She sniffed, removing her hands from the dough and wiping them on her apron before rifling through the papers Gavin had left untouched.

"These," she said. "They were in his trunk. I did not have the courage to look through them until today, but now I wish I hadn't." He retrieved the letters she extended toward him. "These were from Trinity House last year. They told him that they would end the contract with us if the lighthouse did not begin to show improvements. They gave him months to do it, but in these letters, it is made clear that my uncle ceased behaving like the gentleman he claimed to be."

She pointed to the middle paragraph of the letter Gavin held in his hands. "Read this."

Gavin lowered his neck. "'We understand your frustrations, though we have done our best to help. We have sent you the extra funds you have requested to hire another assistant. Keep us informed. And please know, that if you continue in your hostile way with your threats, Trinity House will be forced to take action against you.'"

Gavin stopped reading, though his mouth remained open with surprise. "He was threatening them?"

Abigail raised a shoulder, her eyes still focused on the pages in his hands. "I had no idea. Nor was I aware that they sent wages for another assistant. He always told me Trinity House refused their approval of us hiring another to help. I can only assume that Uncle used the funds for his gaming."

A heaviness weighed upon Gavin's heart. When would the lies,

the deceit end? How much more damage could the deceased man cause to his niece?

He glanced up at her. A shadow of anger, of betrayal, dimmed her eyes.

She had been through so much. How was she to find the courage *again* to go on?

He watched her move to the large book on the table. She flapped the cover back and thumbed through the pages. “This is the logbook he kept for years before purchasing the one we use now,” she said. “He always insisted on completing the daily log himself, saying it was the one thing he could do that I could not. And now I know why.”

Her finger slid along the line that listed the wages received from Trinity House and the amount of money spent on supplies. “I’ve compared the dates on the letters from Trinity House to these. He falsified the numbers, then made it appear as if we needed more supplies. Again, he must have sold the extra provisions received and used the money to fund even more gaming.”

Her voice broke, and she finally looked up at him, her blue eyes brimming with tears. “This went on for years, Gavin. I had no idea we had become destitute merely because of his gaming habits. How could I have been so stupid, so blind as to not see what was happening?”

Gavin watched in silence as her demeanor changed, her brow lowering as she continued.

“I went without food,” she said, slamming the book shut. “I went without new clothing for years. We went without an assistant as I worked myself to exhaustion each day for months. To see now how he wasted our money, the money that *I* earned while *he* sat by and complained about his injury…I can hardly bear to think on it.”

Gavin winced at the obvious turmoil taking place within her. He was at a loss for words. He could not understand the man’s behavior either. How could Mr. Moore, Abigail’s only family, have done such a thing?

“He made me promise to keep Golowduyn,” she said, tears spilling down her cheeks. “How could he? Knowing that he was leaving behind his debts, his secrets, and his lies? He was a selfish coward. Just like his brother.”

His brother. Did Abigail refer to her own father? She had never mentioned him before. In truth, Gavin had wondered at times if she had even known the man at all before his death.

But now was not the time to dwell on things he did not know. That would not ease Abigail’s burden. But then, he knew of nothing that would.

With a silent prayer heavenward, he asked for guidance to help him ease the woman’s pain in any way he could.

“Abigail,” he said softly, waiting until her eyes met his. “Your uncle, like all of us, was not perfect. I can only imagine the guilt that must have racked his conscience when he thought of you. It could very well be the reason he kept away from you—perhaps even the reason he drank. Of course, there is no excuse for his behavior. But no matter his mistakes, I believe that he loved you. Deeply.”

Her eyebrows drew together, her chin quivered, and Gavin could no longer keep himself from reaching out to her. He set the papers onto the table and wrapped his arms around her.

She returned his embrace, her arms sliding around his waist. “I fear his death was no accident,” she whispered against his waistcoat. “That he chose to…”

Gavin hushed her softly. “Do not dwell on such thoughts,” he urged. Of course, he had feared the very same. But they would never know the truth behind Mr. Moore’s death, and thinking on it would only drive them mad.

He rested his cheek against the top of her head, holding her securely within his arms.

“I am sorry you have married into all of this,” she said. “If only you would have known beforehand, you—”

“My decision would still be the same,” he interrupted.

She raised her head from his chest and looked up at him with searching eyes. Gavin’s breath caught in his throat.

Her auburn hair trailed down her temples in soft waves. Her high cheekbones had reddened slightly with her crying. And her lips, femininely curved, were parted, as if she wished to speak.

But in the next moment, she pulled away from his grasp and faced the papers on the table.

Gavin felt her absence keenly. He had enjoyed holding her against him…too much. Such a thing did not bode well for the relationship they had agreed upon.

He never once regretted his offer to maintain a platonic relationship, even now. After all, he would not have Abigail think for one moment that his proposal had been based on anything other than helping her and Golowduyn—for that is all it had been.

Of course, that did not mean he didn’t have hope for the future, that one day their friendship might grow into something more, something deep and abiding. But he knew Abigail was not yet at that point.

And he was more than happy to wait. After all, they had only been married for two days. And they had a lifetime left.

“Gavin?” Abigail stared at him expectantly.

He blinked. “Yes?”

“I asked what you thought we should do,” she responded,

motioning to the papers on the table, “in regard to the list.”

The list. What could be done with the list? He picked up the paper, focusing on the items once again. “Well, I think it highly unlikely that we finish all of this in the time allotted. But I suggest we prove to them that we are, at the very least, willing to try.” He lowered the list and looked up to her, recalling the good news he had been excited to share with her when he’d first arrived home. “I spoke with Lieutenant Harris while in St. Just this morning. He was going to Penzance soon to wait for his arm to heal, but I suggested he come work for us for while he is on leave.”

She moved toward the wad of dough sticking to the table. “Can he help with his injury?”

Gavin pursed his lips. “I’m certain there is something on that list he could do one-handed.” His lip curved. “I know he would appreciate the extra funds while he awaits reassignment.”

“Well, if you think he will benefit us, then by all means, hire him,” Abigail said, sprinkling flour across the dough.

Gavin was pleasantly surprised with her agreeing to his offer. He pushed a little more. “I also heard word that Mr. Honeysett—do you know the young fisherman who lives nearby?” She nodded. “His mother and sister are looking to increase their income, as well. They could work as our cook and serving girl in the mornings, as well as any other tasks that we may need help with before the inspection.”

She brushed aside a stray curl with her finger and left behind a trail of flour on her cheek. “Would you expect them to look after the light?”

“Oh, no, of course not,” he said, finally understanding her hesitance. “Not unless you wish them to.”

Her shoulders visibly relaxed, and she nodded once more. “Very well. I suppose with six more hands our work will seem light. Well… five more hands.”

He chuckled at her joke, and her sidelong glance. How remarkable she was. Even after discovering more about her uncle’s dark past, she was determined to make things work.

Yes, she was an amazing woman. Strong and beautiful. He reached forward, brushing his thumb across the flour on her cheek.

She looked up at him with wide eyes.

“I am sorry, Abigail,” he said with another stroke to her skin, though the flour had long since gone, “about your uncle, I mean. But I wish you to know, I am here to help you. You need not go through this life alone. Not anymore.”

And as she smiled up at him, he could finally say that for once, belief shone in her eyes.

And that was progress, indeed.

Chapter Eight

With Gavin's help, Abigail's mood improved drastically. Though still worried over the improvements of the lighthouse, she felt comfort in knowing she was no longer alone in her fight to keep Golowduyn burning brightly.

The very next day, she and Gavin had gone to the Honeysetts' fishing cottage. They arranged for Mrs. Honeysett and her fifteen-year-old daughter, Poppy, to come to the lighthouse early each morning. They would help with the necessary tasks and prepare the meals for the day, before returning home to look after their own house.

After their agreement was settled upon, the Kendrickses made for St. Just in search of Lieutenant Harris. When Gavin stopped short of the inn, however, Abigail eyed him with a look of confusion.

"What is it?" she asked. "Did you forget something?"

"No, but I thought of somewhere else we needed to be right now."

She waited for him to continue. "And where is that?"

"I will see to Harris while you"—he motioned to the shop they stood nearby—"go in there."

Her eyes followed his, settling eventually on the window in front of them. In bold, red paint, she read the words,

Follett's
Modiste, Milliner
Gloves, Hosiery, Hats, Parasols, Fans

Gavin held out his hand to her, but she refused to accept it. "No, absolutely not."

"Come along," he urged. "Surely you knew I would suggest this sooner or later. How long did you think I would allow you to dress in that drab, brown dress?"

"It is not drab," she protested. Though, as she looked down at it, she could not think of a better word to describe the color and style of

the dress she had worn for years. “At any rate, why would I need anything finer? It would hardly be wise to work in a silk gown, now would it?”

“You are the wife of a captain, Mrs. Kendricks,” Gavin said. “You had best get used to the idea that you will soon be invited to balls and parties.”

She looked away. Guilt pricked at her conscience. She still had yet to mention the Stedman’s dinner party invitation—now lying as ash in the bottom of the hearth. But at the thought of attending a public event in which the mother and daughter would be present, she was fine keeping the secret to herself.

Besides, she could not go out. She had the lighthouse to tend to, as usual.

“Abigail? Are you coming?”

She paused. “Gavin, if this is about what I said yesterday, that Uncle did not buy me new dresses…”

“No, not at all. You are merely in desperate need.”

“I would not say desperate,” she mumbled.

He eyed her dubiously. “How often have you mended that dress?”

She had lost count long ago, but she would never let Gavin know such a thing. “Once or twice.”

He laughed. “I can see six or seven separate lines of stitches on just one sleeve.”

Before Abigail could poke fun at his own exaggeration, the door to the shop opened. The bell rang overhead, and Mrs. Follett exited in a flourish of deep purple skirts.

“Good morning, Captain Kendricks, Mrs. Kendricks,” the shop owner said.

Abigail pulled her lips to one side of her mouth. So everyone knew of her marriage to the captain now? She was sure she could put the blame on Mrs. Stedman. She wouldn’t be surprised if the woman had also told the town how rudely Abigail had dismissed her.

“Do forgive me,” Mrs. Follett continued, “but I could not help but notice the both of you out here whilst I updated the window display.” She motioned over her shoulder. “We received new fans only this morning. They are the latest fashion, I assure you. Would you care to see them closer?”

“No, thank you,” Abigail said.

But Gavin placed a hand at the small of her back and gently pushed her forward. She would not have moved had his touch not made her lose all sense.

“You have read our minds, Mrs. Follett,” Gavin said. “My lovely wife was just about to inquire within for a great many items.”

The shopkeeper’s dark eyes widened with glee. “How wonderful!

Do come in, my dear. I will be more than happy to look after you."

"Go on, Mrs. Kendricks," Gavin said, pushing Abigail forward once more. "I will return soon. Oh, Mrs. Follett, my dear wife will protest anything you suggest, so I really must rely upon you to see that she acquires everything a lady needs, or simply desires."

Mrs. Follett looked as if she had just been entrusted with the Crown Jewels herself. "Of course, Captain. I will devote my attention to her entirely until we are finished. Now, run along so we may be about our business."

She laced her arm through Abigail's and pulled her toward the door. Abigail followed along with a helpless glance in Gavin's direction, but he merely gave her an encouraging nod before she disappeared into the shop.

Abigail had never been poked and prodded so much in all her life as she was for the next two hours. When she had first come to Cornwall, her uncle had taken her to be fitted for several fine dresses. But as she had grown, their money had faded—or rather, her uncle had wasted it away.

But not even the unpleasant thought of his actions could diminish the strange delight now billowing within her chest. Being fussed over certainly was a change—a change she did not mind in the least.

Of course, she protested each new dress, undergarment, outerwear, and accessory that was thrust toward her. But Mrs. Follett proved even more stubborn than Abigail, who was measured and chose fabric for four new gowns and two new work dresses.

By the end of it, Abigail could not fathom how much all of it had cost. She reminded herself that it was Gavin's choice. If he wanted to entrust his fortune to a frivolous shop owner, then so be it.

At the thought of her husband, a warmth radiated within her soul. Would she ever grow used to his kindness, his thoughtfulness? He had seen yet another one of her needs and had immediately sought to fix it.

She knew she was silly to become sentimental over simple gowns, but it was so much more than that. She felt respected, as if Gavin believed her to be of some great value and wished her to dress as such.

Having his good opinion meant the world to her.

After being assured that the items, and the bill, would be sent to Golowduyn when ready, Abigail left the shop and breathed in the fresh air outside.

She could almost see herself wearing one of the fine gowns, her hair piled high in curls. A ribbon tied fashionably beneath her bust. Finally matching Gavin with his own tailored clothing.

She knew attending a dinner party or ball was impossible, as they

couldn't leave the lighthouse unattended. But she could not deny—despite her reservations about being out in Society—the appeal of spending an evening out, completely at her leisure on the arm of her handsome, caring husband.

Gavin moved up the road with a happy sigh. Harris had accepted his offer. With three new people to help at Golowduyn, Gavin was certain he could find more time to spend with his wife at their leisure.

His lips curved as he imagined Abigail dressed in something other than brown. Perhaps in a gown that accentuated her figure, highlighted her auburn hair, and brought out the blue of her eyes.

He worked to calm his racing heart. Yes, he was more than ready to see her as the lady he knew her to be.

With an easy gait, Gavin made for Mrs. Follett's. But when he rounded the corner of a shop and came face-to-face with Myles Sanders, his feet came to an abrupt halt.

"Myles?" he said in surprise.

The young sailor's face immediately contorted with anger. He spat at Gavin and turned in the other direction.

"Wait," Gavin called out, running to block his path. "Myles you must understand—"

"Get out m' way!" Myles shouted.

He pushed with all his force, but Gavin held his ground. "What happened with you and your brother, I am sorry for how things unfolded. But I did not mean for—"

Myles cursed, attempting to spit at Gavin again. "Ye wanted 'im dead! Ye planned it all!"

"Your brother chose to assault me. I did not—"

"Ye be the reason he's dead!"

Myles launched toward him, fury in his jaded eyes, but Gavin pushed him aside with ease. "Calm down, Myles."

The boy's chest heaved with anger. He clearly intended on charging again. But when his eyes flickered above Gavin's shoulder, he backed away and ran in the opposite direction.

Confused, Gavin looked behind him to discover Abigail watching with wide eyes. Blast. She must have seen the whole ordeal.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

Gavin scanned the crowds, ignoring the looks from others. There was no sign of the boy.

He turned back to Abigail, lowering his voice. "His brother's execution has finally been carried out. And Myles is…understandably angry."

Abigail offered him her handkerchief, motioning to the spittle on his jacket lapel. "You ought to leave him be. You may only provoke

him further."

"Yes," he said, accepting the handkerchief with a nod and cleaning himself off. "Yes, you are right."

* * *

With the Honeysetts and Lieutenant Harris helping around the lighthouse, Abigail and Gavin pushed forward with the list of improvements to Golowduyn. Abigail found enjoyment working alongside Mrs. Honeysett and Poppy—their quiet, kind nature fitting in with Abigail's own reserved personality—while Gavin and Lieutenant Harris laughed as they worked, speaking about their days together at sea.

The work was difficult. Each night, Abigail was sorer and more fatigued than the day before. But her soul was no longer weary, and that was a welcome change.

One evening, after the others had left, Abigail and Gavin stood outside, washing the windows after dinner.

A breeze blew the tall grass against her legs and the side of the house. The smell of the ocean—fresh and inviting—sailed under her nose.

She slopped her wet rag against the glass, scrubbing at a stubborn bird dropping before glancing to Gavin. He had paused in his washing, his eyes focused on the sea. She followed his line of sight to where a ship floated slowly on the gleaming water.

"Do you miss it?" she asked. "Being aboard a ship?"

His eyes remained on the vessel. "At times. But I have always been more than content on land, especially when I have a view of the sea."

He seemed to speak truthfully enough, but still she hesitated. "So you do not regret your decision then, to request retirement?"

She had been wanting to ask the question for some time. He seemed to have made the decision to take his leave from the navy rather suddenly. Could he not have simply made an impulsive mistake?

His warm eyes focused on her. "I do not regret my choice at all. I am exactly where I wish to be."

Hope lifted her heart, and she returned her attention to the window.

After a moment, Gavin spoke again. "Abigail, I have been thinking…" He dipped his rag into the bucket of water between them. "Do you think, perhaps, I might be ready to look after the light myself this evening?"

Her hand froze against the window. "Oh," was all she could manage to say. She shouldn't have been surprised. After all, Gavin had

been helping her with the lamps for over a week now. He was more than capable of looking after them himself.

But was *she* capable of relinquishing her control?

"If you wish me to wait, I will," he said, using a dry rag to wipe down the glass before him.

Had the man no faults? His patience pained her. She had to allow him to see to the light. He had more than proven himself. And—dare she admit it?—she trusted him.

"No," she said with a firm nod. "You are more than ready. You may see to them this evening, if you wish to."

His eyes brightened. "I will be down shortly."

He dropped the rag into the grass and darted to the top of the landing in a single leap, disappearing within the house.

She paused, staring at the opened door. "Gavin?"

He ran straight back out of the house without a glance in her direction. "Right. The oil." And he ran around the side of the house to the oil hutch.

She shook her head in amusement.

The humor of the situation was soon lost to her, however, as night fell, and she lay awake in her bed, staring wide-eyed at the ceiling.

After years, her body had simply grown used to waking up at the specific times each night. She knew Gavin's had quickly adjusted, as well, as she had no longer needed to wake him for each refilling.

But as a precaution, she had given him the clockwork device that her uncle had purchased for her when she had first begun waking up for shifts. It worked much like the rotating mechanism of the lighthouse. She turned a small wheel, and a weight at the end slowly pulled down until it reached the bottom, ringing a bell at the top.

However, the device would prove unnecessary, for as the second refilling lurked, thunder rumbled outside, and lightning flashed through her curtains.

She groaned. Of course a storm would occur that evening. Now Gavin would have to remain awake the entire night. He knew that, did he not? Perhaps she ought to remind him, just as a precaution.

She grasped onto her blankets. No, she would remain in her room the entire night. Gavin knew what was required of him. He would remain awake. He would notify her if a shipwreck occurred.

And she trusted him.

With the words repeating over and over in her mind, she eventually fell into a restless sleep, broken masts and raging fires filling what little dreams she had.

When the first ray of light finally crept across her closed eyelids, she jolted awake.

Relief flooded her mind. Daylight had broken through the clouds, and the lighthouse still stood.

She fell back onto her pillow with a contented sigh. She had done it. No. *Gavin* had done it. And with such a comforting thought, she drifted back to sleep.

Hours later, she awoke with a groggy yawn, stretching widely as she rolled out of bed. She could not remember the last time she had slept so late.

Rubbing the sleep from her eyes, she dressed, greeted the Honeysetts who worked away in the kitchen, and then made for outside. She winced at the bright sunlight.

"Ah, look who has finally risen to help us this morning."

She looked toward the stables to see Gavin's teasing eyes in her direction. He and Lieutenant Harris propped up a long piece of wood against the side of the stable, working to expand the paddock.

"I told Lieutenant Harris that we should not expect you until much later today," Gavin continued. "As I'm fairly certain you did not receive a moment of sleep last night."

He cocked a knowing brow, but she looked on in feigned innocence. "I managed to sleep just fine, thank you."

He gave a disbelieving shake of his head. "Well, as you must be well aware, Golowduyn still stands."

"Did you agree to pay Lieutenant Harris to stay up late in the watch room while you slept?" she asked.

Lieutenant Harris chuckled, and Abigail sent a teasing smile in Gavin's direction.

Before he could respond, their attention was drawn to an approaching carriage.

"Who is that?" Gavin asked.

The horses stopped, and he came to stand beside her. They waited as a round man stepped down from the carriage.

"Do you know him?" Gavin asked.

"No, I don't."

The gentleman placed his hat on his balding head before approaching them. His white cravat was tied perfectly beneath his chin. "Captain Kendricks, I presume?"

"Yes, sir," Gavin said. He introduced Lieutenant Harris and Abigail before returning his attention to the stranger. "And you are?"

"I am Mr. Cull. Trinity House has sent me to inspect the property."

Abigail exchanged glances with Gavin. "But we were told we had a fortnight. It has only been one week."

"Due to recent…information that has come to light concerning how this lighthouse was once run, my superiors have insisted that I

arrive today to complete the inspection."

Abigail flushed. She and Gavin had written to Trinity House days before of her uncle's deceit and theft of their money. Gavin had also offered to pay the difference. Mr. Cull was clearly there because of the correspondence.

Before, Golowduyn had shared impeccable trust with the institution. Now, there was only a wary relationship. Yet another thing her uncle had damaged.

"As you can see, we were unable to finish everything, Mr. Cull," Gavin said.

Abigail cast her eyes around her. The grounds were in far better shape than they had been days ago. The grass had been trimmed—no doubt by Gavin that very morning—and fresh flowers were planted near the front of the house. With the fence around the garden mended, the chicken hutch no longer propped up against the cliffside, and the stable doors finally fixed and working beautifully, the lighthouse was beginning to show great improvement.

But they were still far from completion.

"I understand, Captain," Mr. Cull said. "However, I must make my full inspection now of Glow…Gol…Glowdon Lighthouse."

"Golowduyn," Abigail and Gavin corrected at the same time.

They eyes met, and her heart felt lighter, despite Mr. Cull's presence. Gavin was there for her and the lighthouse. She was not alone any longer.

However, as Mr. Cull began his inspection, her nerves returned. She tapped her fingers against her folded arms as the man walked around the oil hutch, making a mark on his paper.

"Abigail?" Gavin spoke with arched brows as he continued his work on the paddock. "Perhaps you ought to find something else to do to occupy your mind."

She looked back to Mr. Cull as he stared at the length of the lighthouse and made more markings.

"What is he writing, do you think?" she asked, ignoring Gavin's suggestion. "Surely he did not expect the lighthouse to be flawless."

"He will see the honest effort we have made. Try not to worry too much about it."

She began to pace across the grass. Should she go inside, tidy up a bit before he had the chance to go in himself?

A sudden thought struck her, and her heart felt as if it dropped into her stomach. "Gavin, I did not see to the lamp room this morning. Oh, it must be in such a state. How could I have forgotten?"

She made for the house, but Gavin stopped her, grasping her hand and pulling her back. "I saw to the light. Remember? I assure you, I left the room very orderly."

"Of course." She wrung her hands together as Mr. Cull appeared at the other side of the lighthouse, having rounded the building.

Gavin returned to the paddock with Lieutenant Harris.

"Did you check the refractors?" she asked. "They needed polishing."

"Yes, I did."

"But I never showed you how to polish them."

"You did. On several occasions." He glanced to Lieutenant Harris with a veiled smile.

"But did I ever—"

"Yes, you did."

She pursed her lips. "You did not know what I was about to say."

"You were very thorough, Abigail," Gavin said. "I'm certain you did not forget to teach me a single thing."

She sighed. "Very well. Only assure me that you trimmed the wicks, and then I shall leave you be."

His face fell, his eyes widening. "Oh, no. That is what I forgot."

She gasped, fingers covering her mouth, before she caught sight of his lips twitching. She dropped her hand, propping it on her waist. "That was hardly amusing, Captain Kendricks."

He chuckled to himself, lifting the beam of wood to the other end of the paddock.

"Was he this insufferable at sea?" she asked Lieutenant Harris.

"Yes, ma'am. Even more so when we both served as lieutenants."

"I learned my bad behavior from you, Harris," Gavin said to his mate.

Abigail could imagine the both of them teasing the other aboard the ships they manned. She would have liked to see Gavin as a lieutenant. Or perhaps as a regular seaman, rigging up the ship, his shirt removed to deal with the heat from the glaring sun above. His muscles working as he laughed with his shipmates.

The front door opened. Abigail blinked away the image to see Mr. Cull disappear inside.

Now she could no longer see him. What if he made even more notes about the inside of their home? She groaned.

"I'd say you are in need of a distraction."

Gavin dropped his tools to the ground and walked toward her. "Harris, I'm sorry, but I think we ought to end our work for the day. If I do not see to my wife, she will drive herself mad."

Lieutenant Harris, ever-cheerful, agreed to return on the morrow. Gavin went inside next to tell the Honeysetts the same thing, and they soon left, as well.

When they were alone, Abigail blew out an annoyed huff. "We do not need to stop working. After all, it is the best sort of distraction."

Gavin offered her his arm. “No, no more working for you. You need to discover other, more relaxing ways to distract you.”

Hesitantly, she took his arm. Her fingers warmed against his flesh, his sleeves rolled to his upper arms. “Well, then what do you suggest?”

“A nice, leisurely stroll along the beach.”

Her lips pulled into a frown. A stroll? On the beach? She could not remember when she had last spent leisure time on the sand.

They walked down the winding slope and reached Golowduyn Beach in a matter of moments. They moved to just out of the water’s reach as Gavin sat down in the sand, motioning for her to sit next to him.

She tilted her head. “I thought you said you wanted to walk.”

“Yes, but now I wish to sit.” He leaned back, his legs crossed at his ankles as he patted the sand next to him. “Come, sit.”

She wrinkled her nose. “I do not know how you can rest comfortably with that”—she waved her hand in the air with a flourish toward the lighthouse”—and the man within looming above us.”

“Because there is nothing more we can do.” His brown eyes looked out to the sea. “Please, sit down with me.”

With a sigh, Abigail relented, plopping down next to him. She tucked her legs beneath her as she rested one hand in the sand. “There, I have sat down. Now what do you wish me to do?”

“Now I wish for you to relax. Breathe.” He motioned to the sea. “When was the last time you simply enjoyed the scenery around you?”

She raised her chin. “I do so nearly every day.”

“That is entirely untrue, Abigail Kendricks, and you know it.”

Her innocent expression did not last long when he raised his eyebrows toward her with a knowing look. Abigail had never seen that shade of brown before in a pair of eyes. In the sunlight, they shone nearly copper.

“Very well,” she said, facing forward, if only to stop herself from gazing further into his captivating eyes. “I concede. Perhaps I do not enjoy the scenery nearly as much as I used to. I suppose I have been distracted.”

“Understandably,” Gavin agreed. “Much has occurred in your life these past few weeks. However, it is good to slow down at times to appreciate this beauty. Not everyone is as fortunate as we are to live here.”

That was true enough. Before her uncle’s death, even with the amount of work she had seen to, she had still taken the time to enjoy the sunset, to feel the wind caressing her face, to hear the gulls crying above the sea.

Perhaps Gavin was right. Perhaps she did need to relax, to

appreciate the beauty around her—as she once did.

With a calming breath, she looked to the water. The waves changed colors as they curved toward the land. Silver in the sun's light as they peaked. Black beneath the waves' crests. Sapphire blue where the water stretched out endlessly before them.

The sand beneath her hands warmed her skin, and the salty sea breeze stroked her face.

The sea had always proved to soothe her nerves. Why had she stayed away for so long?

"May I ask you a question, Abigail?"

Her eyes squinted in the bright sunshine. "Of course."

"Why do you appear hesitant to speak about your past? I mean, before you came to Golowduyn?"

She struggled to grasp onto the peace she had felt before, though it slipped through her fingers like wet sand. "I'm not hesitant to speak of such things."

She had lied. And she was fairly certain Gavin knew it. Her chest tightened, and she leaned forward, circling her finger around in the sand. Perhaps if she offered to answer his questions, he would leave her be—perhaps he would not dig so deeply into what she prayed remained covered.

"What would like you to know?" she asked. "You may ask me anything."

And she would respond with honesty. So long as he did not ask questions she could not answer.

He narrowed his eyes, as if to test the waters of her willingness. "Very well. So you mentioned you were at a boarding school before Mr. Moore brought you here. Where was the school located?"

That was an easy enough answer. "In a small town in Cheshire."

"Had you ever been to Cornwall before you came here? On a visit, perhaps?"'

"No." Another easy answer.

"Did you return to Cheshire after your uncle brought you here?"

"No, nor do I ever intend to."

She avoided his stares as his questions continued.

"Your uncle mentioned that his family home was in Staffordshire. Were you born there, as well, before being sent to school?"

She smoothed the sand next to her with her palm, focusing on the crumbly texture as she stared at the water sliding up the beach. "No, my mother bore me elsewhere."

She knew he expected more from her, but what else could she say without crossing into dangerous territory?

"Were you close with her?" he asked next.

As the waves receded, bubbles clung to the sand in front of her

before popping silently into the air. “Not particularly. She died shortly before I was sent to school, so I don’t remember much about her.”

“So…your father chose to send you then?”

“No, my…my grandmother did.”

She could see the surprise in his eyes, could already hear the next comment on his tongue.

“I did not know you knew your grandmother,” he would say. “Were you close to her, or your father?” he would ask.

But she could not respond without sharing more than she wished to. The conversation needed to change. Immediately.

She glanced up at the lighthouse. “Do you think Mr. Cull will be finished now? I do wonder why he is taking so long.”

Gavin did not respond. He was either wondering about the family she never spoke of—or how he had been correct in his assumption that she did not like to speak about her past.

Either way, she was going to allow the conversation to lie dormant. At least for the time being. She needed to tell him the truth, and one day she would. But he had said himself that she need not speak of it until she was ready.

And she certainly was not ready.

She focused on the cliffside where the waves splashed onto the rocks, water spilling down over the uneven sides. The shipwreck had long since been cleaned up, but she could almost see the *Valour* still on its side, sails flapping in the wind, wood splintered into pieces.

She narrowed her eyes.

Splintered wood? How could that be? It was not from the shipwreck, was it?

“What is that?” She stood, taking a few steps forward. Her heart sank in her chest as slowly as her boots in the sand. “Gavin. That is our boat.”

He came up to her side. “Are you certain?”

“Yes, look.”

She pointed before moving across the sand, Gavin following closely behind. When they neared the rocks, they could not deny what they saw. The small vessel lay in irreparably broken pieces upon the rocky shoreline.

“How did it become loose?” she questioned. “I’m certain I tied it last I used it.”

She looked to the top of the beach. The rope was missing from the stake her uncle had driven deep into the sand years before.

“Did you use the boat last?” she asked him.

“I’ve never used it before,” Gavin replied. “But you must have heard the storm last night. Perhaps the waves reached it and tore it away.”

She struggled to swallow, the anxiety constricting her throat. “What if it storms again tonight? What are we to do if a shipwreck occurs and we have no boat to help them?” An unsettling image of sailors crying out for help amidst the rocks flashed before her mind. “Gavin, what are we to do?”

He rested a hand on her shoulder. “Worry not. When Mr. Cull is finished, I’ll ride to Mr. Honeysett to see if we may borrow one of his boats until we can commission another for us.”

Of course. That was the sensible thing to do. The tension in her neck eased, though only slightly. She still could not understand how the boat had become loose.

“Come along.”

She looked to Gavin, who offered his arm to her, a disappointed look on his face.

“Let us return to the lighthouse,” she said. “I can see you still need a bit of practice when it comes to enjoying time away from work.”

Abigail followed him back to Golowduyn.

Before long, Mr. Cull emerged from the house. His face was red as he swiped a handkerchief over his brow.

Abigail glanced sidelong at Gavin. “That is how you appeared when you first climbed to the lamp room.”

His mouth dropped open in mock offense. “I did not.”

Mr. Cull cleared his throat, breaking through the look they shared.

“I trust you found Golowduyn in a much better state than expected,” Gavin said.

“I did,” Mr. Cull responded. “The lighthouse is nowhere near perfect, I assure you. But the incentive you have shown in merely a week is promising, indeed.”

Abigail could hardly believe her ears. The man was pleased with what he saw?

He continued. “As such, Trinity House will be pleased to continue our arrangement with Golow…Gwolow…with your lighthouse.”

Abigail and Gavin exchanged quick glances, and her excitement doubled to see his brown eyes alight with joy.

“Thank you, sir,” Abigail said.

“I am also to inform you,” he continued, “that as you seem more than willing to work honestly with us, we will not require you to pay back the sum your uncle mismanaged. You may expect a letter soon to officially extend the contract. As for now, I must excuse myself to return my report. Good day to you both.”

They watched him hoist himself into the carriage.

The moment the door shut and the horses pulled away, Abigail

and Gavin turned toward each other.

"We did it," he said.

"I can't believe it," she replied.

And she couldn't. They had proven themselves worthy, and Golowduyn would remain lit. Her chest swelled. She could no longer help herself.

With giddy laughter, she sailed toward Gavin and wrapped her arms around his neck.

"Thank you," she said. "It could not have been done without you."

Gavin hesitated only a moment before returning Abigail's embrace. Her laughter lilted in his ear, overpowering his self-control. He closed his eyes, breathing in the scent of her hair as he leaned in closer to her.

She smelled of the sea.

Time stood still as he held her, he allowed his hands to spread out across her back, holding her closer, tighter. Their embrace before, after the letter from Trinity House, had been one more of comfort.

But this one…this one overwhelmed his senses. This one caused his mind to spin.

This one stirred the feelings in his heart—feelings that had been simmering since the very day he'd met the woman.

And he wanted nothing more than to explore those feelings further.

Her arms relaxed around his neck, and she pulled back enough for their eyes to meet, but he did not release his hold of her. He peered into her eyes that were as blue as the sea. What secrets were behind them—bright one moment, dark the next—as she moved from staring at the sea to speaking of her past?

One day, he would help her overcome her trepidations, but now…now he was going to relish the feel of the woman in his arms.

And no matter what, he would not become distracted by her smooth lips that beckoned him forward as she raised her chin. Lips that he could nearly feel on his own. Lips that parted as he closed the distance between them.

Until Abigail dropped her gaze and pulled away from his hold.

His hands fell to his sides, his heart sinking faster than an anchor plummeting into the sea.

"I suppose we still have work to do," Abigail said, scratching the back of her neck and looking toward the house. "Even if we *have* passed the inspection."

Gavin stifled a sigh, still attempting to restrain his disappointment. "Yes, you are right. We mustn't celebrate

prematurely."

Her eyes flickered toward him before she ducked her head and scurried toward the house.

Gavin watched her skirts sway back and forth as she departed, and reality slowly returned. He could not say he was glad the kiss had not occurred, but their relationship was probably better for it, what with their agreement still intact.

And yet, he took heart. He had seen the look of desire in her eyes, and the way she had leaned in closer to him.

Yes, his wife had seemed to want to kiss him as greatly as he had wished to kiss her.

And that, more than anything, encouraged him to maintain his patience. He could hold off as long as he needed to, so long as the prize was winning Abigail's affection.

* * *

An hour later, and Abigail was still inside hiding away. Gavin had ridden and returned from the Honeysetts, requesting the use of their boat. And after, he'd brought Lieutenant Harris back from St. Just, now the inspection was complete.

She could see them working away at the paddock as she measured the curtains against the sitting room windows. The task was a fine enough excuse to avoid her husband after what had occurred—or rather, hadn't occurred—between them.

She had been so silly to embrace him. And her eyes lingering on his mouth? Why, that was simply foolish. Of course she would wish to kiss him after that. The subtle, masculine curves of his lips had nearly pulled her in on their own.

Fortunately she had recalled their agreement before anything might have actually happened. Not that kissing him would have been terrible. In truth, she had an inkling that sharing such a moment with Gavin would be very nice. But that was the opposite of what they both wanted, was it not?

The door opened, footsteps sounding, and her heart jumped.

"Abigail?" Gavin appeared around the corner, his arms filled with stacks of brown-wrapped packages. "These have just come for you. Your new clothing. And this one is from me."

She stared at the pile as he laid them on the settee. He had purchased her a gift? Her eyes lingered on the small, rectangular package on the top. She itched to open the gowns, to feel the fine fabric once again between her fingertips. But she had an even greater desire to see what he had purchased for her.

However, with Gavin still standing in the room, she needed to see first how he fared after their near-kiss. To her disappointment, he

seemed rather cheerful.

"Did you see the Honeysetts?" she asked.

"Yes. Mr. Honeysett is more than willing to lend us his boat. Harris and I will retrieve it just as soon as the paddock is completed."

"Thank you."

He nodded, lingering behind the settee. "Before I forget, there is something I wish to ask you."

Her shoulders tensed. She braced for another question related to her past. "Yes?"

"What would you say to having Lieutenant Harris look after the lamps?"

She blinked, attempting to keep up with the jump in topics. "May I ask why? Do we need him to?"

He shrugged, picking at the wood at the back of the settee. "Well, as Lieutenant Harris and I were leaving town today, Mrs. Stedman approached me with an invitation to her dinner party, to be held in a week's time. I thought we could instruct Harris so he could look after the lights for a few hours while we attend the party together."

At the mention of the Stedmans, Abigail's heart hardened. "Did Mrs. Stedman not tell you I had already declined her invitation?"

"No, she didn't. But then…why did you not tell me you knew of the invitation before now?"

"I suppose it slipped my memory," she muttered, too angry to say anything else.

Mrs. Stedman extending the invitation to Gavin—after already knowing of Abigail's refusal—was nothing more than the woman's attempt to draw closer to Gavin.

The woman was a snake.

"Well," Gavin began, apparently unaware of the anger raging in her soul, "now that Golowduyn has passed the inspection, might you reconsider your answer? Lieutenant Harris will be more than capable. We could leave and return before the first refilling. And if it storms, of course, we could remain here."

Abigail could not understand his desire to go. Did he not recall the fact that Mrs. Stedman had spread rumors about the Moores? She toyed with the idea of telling Gavin Mrs. Stedman's current plan—to have her daughter destroy his marriage—but she suppressed the idea at once. To say such a thing aloud would be humiliating.

"So would you like to attend?" Gavin asked.

"Thank you, but I would rather not."

He paused. "Because it is a dinner party?"

"Because the Stedmans are hosting," she clarified. "If you knew what they…"

She shook her head. She could say nothing further. She was too

afraid. Afraid of leaving the lighthouse when the lamps needed looking after, afraid of confronting the Stedmans, afraid of being made a fool in front of them. Again.

And Gavin. She was afraid of disappointing Gavin.

She was well aware of who she was, where she had come from—and how she could not compare to the fine women in Society. But what would happen when Gavin discovered the same? Would he realize his mistake and long for a grander life, and a finer wife? She knew he would not leave her. He was too honorable for that. But could she bear to be with him if she knew he regretted his decision to marry her?

"I'm afraid I don't understand, Abigail," Gavin said, breaking up her thoughts, "Mrs. Stedman seems to have moved past what occurred between your two families. She may not have behaved perfectly long ago, but perhaps she is wishing to make amends. Perhaps she *has* changed. Can you not?"

A flame ignited in her soul. She took a step toward him, her brow low. "In regard to the Stedmans, no, I cannot change. I *will* not change. You may attend if you so wish. But I will not step foot in Pryvly House again."

"Again?"

She ground her teeth together. She would not explain herself. Not after the last time Gavin had simply brushed aside her words about the Stedmans.

She turned away from him and focused instead on the curtain in her hands, refusing to say another word.

After a moment, his retreating footsteps reached her ears—as well as his sigh. And when he left the house, closing the door behind him, her shoulders slumped forward.

She looked to the empty doorway with a sigh of her own before her eyes fell upon the packages still resting on the settee.

She chewed at her bottom lip, eying the top package once again. Should she not wait to open it, for when she was in a better mood? Or perhaps the item within would be just the thing to *put* her in a better mood.

Dropping the curtain on the side chair, she reached for the package and unwrapped it. At the sight of the gift, she winced.

A brand-new book. A collection of poetry, bound in red leather with thick, cream-colored pages.

She recalled the first time she had shown Gavin around the lamp room. He must have recalled her wish to receive a new book.

She clutched the book to her chest and marched through the house, swinging open the front door with a great sigh. Her eyes immediately focused on Gavin as he hammered at the paddock fence.

Lieutenant Harris propped the wood up with one arm and his waist.

"Very well," she called out. Both men looked up to her in surprise. "I will go with you to Pryvly House."

Gavin's eyes dropped to the book she held. "Are you certain?"

She pulled her lips close together and nodded. Gavin's eyes wrinkled at the sides as he exchanged a glance with Lieutenant Harris. But before Gavin could say a word in response, she turned around and vanished back into the house.

Chapter Nine

“It certainly is nice to see you in a different gown, Abigail. You look lovely.”

Abigail could hear the sincerity in Gavin’s tone, but she brushed his compliment aside. After all, he would hardly think she looked lovely when they arrived at Pryvly House and he was reminded what a true lady looked like.

They walked across the countryside, heading in the direction of the Stedmans’ home. Gavin had offered to rent a carriage—they were still waiting on the one he had commissioned when they were first married—but Abigail had insisted on walking, hoping it would calm her nerves.

It didn’t.

She looked down at her soft yellow gown. Embroidered golden flowers trimmed the bottom of her skirts and around her sleeves, and a dark yellow ribbon was tied beneath her bodice. It was in no way excessive, nor was it very fine, but Gavin had assured her the gown was perfect for a dinner party.

She only prayed she would not draw too much attention to herself, as she had the first time she’d worn finery, the first time she’d been to Pryvly House. When she was a young girl, she had attended a party to celebrate Miss Stedman’s birthday. They accused her of dressing above her station, of attempting to be someone she would never be.

Of course, such a thing would not happen again, now Abigail was a grown woman. She would not allow it.

In an attempt to distract herself from the leaded feeling in her feet, she focused on the scenery in the evening’s golden light. Sparrows flew from tree to tree. Puddles lined the drying pathway they walked on—evidence of the storm they’d had the day before. If only the rain would have lasted through tonight. Then she could have stayed home.

“Are you worried about leaving Golowduyn?” Gavin asked.

Abigail had been so wrapped up in her thoughts, she’d nearly forgotten she walked beside him. “Not terribly.”

In truth, that was the one thing she was not overly concerned about. They had already lit the lamps and would return before they needed refilling, and Abigail was certain she and Gavin had been thorough enough with their instructions to Lieutenant Harris.

“I trust the lieutenant,” she said. “And I don’t imagine anything will happen to the lighthouse in a few simple hours.”

“You are handling it far better than I expected, I must admit. So, if leaving the lighthouse does not trouble you, what causes the look of discomfort upon your brow?”

She removed the creases from her forehead and forced a smile. “Nothing, I assure you.”

He regarded her curiously, but she ignored him, looking ahead as Pryvly House finally came into view.

The mere sight of it made her insides harden, as if she prepared for a direct strike to her stomach. She had not been inside since she was a child. And she had truly hoped to never return.

Three stories tall, Pryvly House rested neatly on the highest section of a small hill. Red brick spread out across the structure in between countless windows stretched tall and thin. The grounds matched the house with immaculate care—the grass neatly trimmed and curved hedges making for a lovely image in the garden. A large pond filled the area to the left of the house, and a decorative statue stood in the center—a goddess in flowing robes. Mrs. Stedman had clearly enjoyed spending the money she had been left with after her husband’s death.

As they finally reached the daunting house, Abigail’s nerves weakened her limbs. She clung to Gavin’s jacket sleeve, praying to glean some of his own strength to use for herself.

When she was younger, she had attended local gatherings on Tregalwen Beach—a white, sandy shore located south of Golowduyn—at her uncle’s insistence. She had always remained close to his side, hardly speaking to anyone, until she finally managed to escape back home.

Would Gavin mind terribly if she did the same with him, remained at his side the entire evening? Perhaps he wouldn’t, if she tried to remain until the rest of the party dispersed.

She reminded herself not to cower, that she was attending for the sake of her husband, who had already done so much for her. But as the footman answered the door and led them through the familiar house, bringing them to the drawing room, her courage vanished.

She stepped over the threshold and willed herself to remain

unintimidated by the grand room, though her eyes roved over the décor.

It had been redecorated since she was last there. Cream paneling lined the walls. The long, floral curtains were tied open to allow the glowing light from outside to soften the room. Paintings of family members in their gilded frames covered nearly the entire east wall.

Abigail clutched her hands together in front of her. Though she felt out of place, she raised her chin. No matter the eyes around the room darting away from her, unwilling to make eye contact—just another brand of judgment—she would not cower. She would not shrink.

"Captain, Mrs. Kendricks, welcome to our humble home."

They turned to face Mrs. Stedman, who walked toward them with open arms. "I was so pleased to receive your note, saying you would join us after all. Do come in."

Abigail struggled not to stare. If she did not know any better, she would have thought the woman had changed. Mrs. Stedman's sincere smile reached out to both Gavin and Abigail, and her eyes shone brightly.

But Abigail knew the truth. Mrs. Stedman had been perfectly clear outside the door of Golowduyn. And Abigail would never forget the words she had overheard.

"What a lovely new gown, Mrs. Kendricks," the woman said. "I trust you did the needlework yourself?"

Abigail stiffened. There she was, the true Mrs. Stedman. Though, she spoke so sweetly, Abigail was sure Gavin would not notice the reproach. Just like before. "No, I ordered it from Mrs. Follett's."

"Oh, of course. I forget you would be allowed such delicacies now." Mrs. Stedman glanced to Gavin with a knowing look. "Well I do hope you will not feel too overwhelmed here, Mrs. Kendricks. I understand a young woman's first dinner party can be quite unnerving. You must ask my daughter if you are in need of guidance. After all, she has been attending them for years now." She looked over her shoulder and motioned her daughter closer.

Miss Stedman, who had been standing nearby, floated toward them in a delicate, puce gown that flowed with every movement she made. Her dark hair was pinned up in an elegant twist. She curtsied first to Abigail—who struggled to return the gesture willingly—before facing Gavin.

"Captain Kendricks, you look well this evening."

The young woman was no more than nineteen years of age, and yet, Abigail felt like a child around her poised elegance. She cursed her choice to wear her simple, yellow gown. She should have chosen something nicer. By not drawing attention to herself, she was certain

to inadvertently drive her husband's attention elsewhere.

"Thank you, Miss Stedman," Gavin responded. "As do you."

Miss Stedman's dimples deepened, and a pink blush tinted her otherwise snowy-white cheeks.

Abigail scratched unconsciously at the freckles dotting her nose.

She had hoped the girl would have said no to her mother's scheming. But it was clear that Miss Stedman would vie for Gavin's attention whether he was married or not.

But Gavin would not fall for her charms…would he? Doubt poured into the cracks already forming in Abigail's confidence. He had already taken more notice of the beautiful young woman than his dowdy wife, had he not?

But when Abigail looked up at him, she was surprised to see him staring down at her with an encouraging smile. She was struck again with how handsome he was. His high collar and dark dinner jacket, his confident stance and easy countenance, made clear one thing—Gavin was born for such parties and elegant company.

And Abigail was not.

"We are fewer in numbers today, as you can see," Mrs. Stedman said, breaking into her thoughts. "The Madderns are not feeling well, this evening, and the Rosewalls are in London, I believe. We are happy our numbers are not so very few with you in attendance, though."

Abigail glanced around the room.

The physician, Mr. Rennalls, and his considerably younger wife stood in the corner of the room, speaking with the Biddles, a droll expression on both the vicar's face and his wife's. Nearby was Mr. Burke—a single gentleman who had just taken over his father's estate nearby, and the Summerfields, Mrs. Causey's grandparents. The short, elderly couple had always been kind to Abigail and her uncle, just like their granddaughter.

Abigail was certain Uncle Ellis had dined at one point or another with each person in attendance, all before he was injured—all while she had watched over the lighthouse.

She had always wondered what it would be like if she and her uncle had switched places. If she had attended the parties and he saw to the lighthouse. Now she knew. She was far more comfortable in the safety of Golowduyn.

As Abigail observed the others in the room, Mrs. Stedman prattled on about what to expect for the rest of the evening.

"The food selection we have is divine, as I'm sure you'll agree, Captain Kendricks, and then we shall hear my daughter sing and play the pianoforte, a most remarkable talent."

Finally dinner was announced.

The guests filed into the dining room and sat around the table.

Abigail moved to the far end, her eyes upon the spread. Shining silverware, smooth tabletops, glass goblets—it was all rather impressive. But she longed for her humble kitchen, with a modest fire roasting a pheasant that warmed the house with its aroma.

She looked to other end of the table. Gavin was situated on the opposite side of her, seated right next to Miss Stedman.

Abigail cringed. She hardly touched her bowl of soup during the first course. Her eyes continually darted around the table, wondering what judgments were being made for the lighthouse keeper seated in the midst of them. But most of the guests seemed too occupied with the food and conversation to take much notice of her at all.

She contemplated sidling out of her chair and creeping from the room, but Gavin would notice. He'd hardly removed his eyes from her the entire meal, though she had only seen so from the corner of her eye. She couldn't look directly at him, for she would see Miss Stedman, as well. And then Abigail would have to acknowledge how well the young woman's finery matched with Gavin's.

When the second course began, the conversation finally shifted from Mrs. Stedman's continual doting of her daughter to the lighthouse, and Abigail's eyes darted toward Gavin.

"Is it true you have hired an assistant keeper, Captain?" Mr. Summerfield asked, seated directly across from Abigail.

"We have," Gavin responded. "He was my first lieutenant aboard the *Valour*. He suits the task very well, does he not, Mrs. Kendricks?"

All eyes fell on Abigail, and she peered down at the small portions she'd placed upon her plate. Of course Gavin would try to include her. But did he not realize she was just fine being invisible? "Yes, he does."

"That is fine news," Mrs. Summerfield said, seated further down the table on Abigail's side. Her cheerful voice sounded much like Mrs. Causey's, only older. "I do hope this means we will see more of the both of you."

Her eyes nearly disappeared as she smiled warmly at Abigail, and Abigail's discomfort eased, if only slightly.

"Do you enjoy reading much, Captain?" Mrs. Stedman asked in a lowered voice. She was clearly attempting to create a more intimate conversation between those at the head of the table.

"I do," Gavin replied. "But my wife is a more voracious reader than I."

Abigail nearly groaned at his attempt to include her yet again. Mrs. Stedman clearly had no desire to speak to anyone but Gavin.

"Oh, my daughter reads more than anyone I have ever known," Mrs. Stedman continued as if she hadn't heard him acknowledging his wife. "She reads often to me. Her tone is most melodious. Her own husband, when the time comes, will be blessed to have such a voice at

his disposal."

"To be sure," Gavin responded with all the politeness of a gentleman.

Abigail felt sick. In an effort to avoid returning the contents of her stomach back onto her plate, she focused her attention on the other conversations around her.

"There is a new shipment of lace at Mrs. Follett's. I am anxious to see if they are as fine as she has suggested."

"We ought to go together."

"Did you hear Mr. Rosewall's mine has suffered a cave in again?"

"His workers must be desperate if they remain working there."

"As I mentioned before, my daughter plays very well. Having been at sea, Captain Kendricks, you must not have had the opportunity to listen to the pianoforte for some time."

"No, I haven't."

How had Abigail returned to listening to the conversation centered around Gavin once again? She glanced furtively toward him, the muscles in his jaw working as he chewed.

"Do you miss the sea, Captain?" Mr. Rennalls asked.

Abigail noted Mrs. Stedman doing her best to hide her displeasure at her conversation being usurped.

"How could I miss it while living right at its doorstep?" Gavin responded.

"Ah, but the life of a sea captain," Mr. Burke piped in between his chews. "How much less troublesome to live on water than land."

"Oh, not for the captain seated before you," Mr. Summerfield said, the wrinkles in his brow increasing as he smiled. "Surely you have heard tale of Captain Kendricks's arrival?"

Mrs. Rennalls's eyes were wide with excitement. "Of course he has. Captain Kendricks was all the talk of St. Just."

Mrs. Summerfield nodded. "He still is. Despite the terrible occurrence of the shipwreck."

"Yes, but how did it even occur?" Mrs. Stedman finally joined in the conversation. "Was Golowduyn not shining to warn you of your approach to land?"

Abigail nearly pulled a face at the woman's insinuation.

"No, Golowduyn's light certainly shined," Gavin responded. "In truth, the lighthouse was the very thing that directed us toward the smaller rocks first. That is how we were able to avoid more casualties than we suffered. The storm and broken anchor cables were the true causes of the shipwreck."

"And the traitorous actions of the Sanders brothers," Mr. Burke added. "What happened to the degenerates, Captain?"

Abigail noted Gavin's weary brow. She knew the Sanderses were

difficult for him to speak about.

Miss Stedman stared up at Gavin, too, her voice lilting as she spoke. “If the memory is too painful, Captain, please, do not trouble yourself for our sake.”

Abigail wondered if it would be considered so very impolite to take the silver lid off of the boiled potatoes and throw it across the room at the woman who seemed incapable of removing her eyes from Abigail’s husband.

“No, it is quite all right,” Gavin responded.

Miss Stedman was clearly disappointed to receive no further response. Abigail tried not to raise her chin too haughtily.

“The elder brother has been punished for his mistakes,” Gavin answered Mr. Burke, “but the younger was not convicted.”

“Shame that,” Mr. Rennalls said.

He earned a stern look from Mr. Biddle. “Let us look to our manners, gentlemen,” the vicar said. “We must speak of softer matters while in the presence of these fine women. I fear their constitutions would not appreciate such a conversation.”

“Yes, thank you, Mr. Biddle,” Mrs. Stedman said with a breathy sigh. “To hear such tales of shipwrecks and mutiny. I can hardly bear it.”

“Then be grateful you do not have to live through such ordeals, ma’am,” Gavin said.

Abigail thought she caught a hint of impatience in his voice.

“Oh, I am,” Mrs. Stedman said. “As is my Constance. Are we not, my dear?”

“Yes, Mother.”

“And we all ought to be grateful for the brave men who risk their lives for king and country,” Mrs. Summerfield added.

“And women,” Gavin added, “for it was my wife who rowed out to save me and my first lieutenant from watery graves.”

Abigail’s face burned as she became the center of attention once again.

“It is true, then?” Mrs. Summerfield asked.

“I thought it was a rumor,” said Mrs. Stedman.

Abigail hesitated. “No, I…I did. But I was merely performing my duties as a lighthouse keeper.”

“Marvelous,” Mr. Summerfield said, his eyes shining. “What a tale to tell your children one day, that their mother saved their father.”

Abigail blanched.

Fortunately, the next conversation focused elsewhere, on Mr. Biddle and the sermon he would deliver this Sunday, but Abigail hardly heard.

She was too busy dwelling on what Mr. Summerfield had said.

Her and Gavin's children. They would not be having children. How could they?

She risked a quick glance in Gavin's direction. He spoke with Mr. Burke, seemingly unaware of Mr. Summerfield's innocent words. He must not care to have children then—her children. Otherwise he would not have agreed to the relationship they had formed.

The breath slipped from her lungs. She couldn't sit straight any longer. Her back curved. How long would this dinner last? How much longer would she have to suffer?

She tried to ignore the fact that Miss Stedman and Gavin conversed with each other more than anyone else at the table. Abigail knew Mrs. Stedman was to blame, but she could not help but fear that Gavin was beginning to do just as the woman had predicted. He must now be all too aware of Abigail's lack of accomplishments, of her lack of feminine allure and charm, in comparison to Miss Stedman.

When the meal ended, Abigail ignored Gavin's encouraging smile in her direction as she followed the women from the room. She did not want to be encouraged. She wanted to go home.

Remaining at the back of the group, Abigail moved through the bright hallways, wondering if the journey felt as much like a funeral procession to everyone else as it did to her.

As the rest of the women filed through the drawing room, taking seats near the blazing fire, Abigail remained in the doorway. She had tried not to become intimidated by the grand house, the elegant talk, and the fine gowns. But she was only fooling herself. She was still that poor, lonely little girl, pretending to be someone she could never be.

"Mrs. Kendricks?"

She turned to the group of ladies who watched her with wondering eyes. Mrs. Summerfield's sincerity stood out from the rest.

"Won't you come sit, my dear?" she asked, patting the seat next to her on the settee. "I have saved a seat here just for you."

Abigail took tentative steps forward, doing her best to ignore the stares from others as she sat gingerly on the red-cushioned seat.

"Will you be comfortable there, Miss Moore?" Mrs. Stedman asked across from her. "After all, the heat from our large hearth compared to those in your little lighthouse may be a bit overwhelming for you."

Abigail bit back a retort. So she was 'Miss Moore' again? She wondered what else Mrs. Stedman would say now that Gavin was not there to be impressed by her words.

She stared at the door. Could she plot an escape before the gentlemen returned? Would Gavin even notice her absence? Certainly not with Miss Stedman to distract him.

"Is this your first night away from Golowduyn, Mrs. Kendricks?"

Mrs. Summerfield asked. Her graying hair was pulled softly back and wrapped in a small, roped turban.

"It is," Abigail responded. She had not dwelt on the lighthouse as much as she thought she would have. Of course, she *was* preoccupied with other matters.

But that made her wonder. If she had been anywhere but Pryvly House, if she and Gavin were together without the Stedmans hovering over them, would she enjoy the small taste of freedom with him?

"Does marriage suit you, Mrs. Kendricks?" Mrs. Rennalls asked. Her nose pinched together at the end, and her eyebrows were thin and arched. She looked very much like she was permanently smelling rotten eggs. "I have been with my Timothy for nearly a year now, so if you need any advice, my experience may prove useful."

Abigail forced a grateful smile but said nothing.

"After all," Mrs. Rennalls continued, "a loving marriage must be strived for daily."

"Absolutely," Mrs. Stedman agreed. "I believed the same when my dear husband was alive. He was very happy with me, I daresay." She paused. "And he made me happy, as well. I do miss him."

A flash of sorrow crossed the woman's face.

Abigail had never seen such transparency from the woman. But it was gone as quickly as it came, replaced with the typical, bland placidity once more.

"My daughter has learned the art of love from her parents' example, have you not, Constance?"

Miss Stedman had remained silent since the dining room, a faraway look to her eye. She blinked mutely. "Yes, Mother."

Abigail's eyes remained on the young woman. What was she thinking as she sat there in silence, clearly distracted? Abigail wondered if she felt even the slightest remorse for her sordid intentions with Gavin.

"Yes," Mrs. Stedman repeated, "she shall make a husband very happy one day. That is what is most important, is it not? After all, if a wife does not satisfy her husband, then what is the point of a marriage at all?"

Her lips curled at the ends as she looked in Abigail's direction.

Abigail did not miss the woman's insinuation. However, as she eyed the other women in the room, another conversation began, and no one else appeared aware of the slight. Did none of them suspect—like Mrs. Stedman—that Abigail's marriage was based upon Gavin's charity and not love?

"How are you faring, Mrs. Kendricks?" Mrs. Summerfield asked in a near whisper.

Her hand covered Abigail's.

“I am well.” Abigail glanced to the others. Their attention was entirely focused on Mrs. Rennalls as she delivered the latest gossip she’d heard while listening in on the patients visiting her physician husband.

Mrs. Summerfield leaned in closer. “Well, you are doing far better than I did at my first dinner party. I was so nervous, I spilt pea soup straight down the front of my gown. Then I dropped my spoon to the floor, and when I bent down to retrieve it, I knocked my head on the arm of the man with whom I was desperately in love.” She closed her eyes and shook her head, clearly reliving the moment. “Thankfully, he thought my sheer foolishness endearing, and he married me because of it.”

Abigail felt the tension in her neck slightly ease.

“Now,” Mrs. Summerfield continued, “I must ask after Golowduyn. Your uncle once took us on a tour through the tower. Of course, that was so very long ago, you would not remember.”

“No, I remember,” Abigail said. When Abigail had first come to Golowduyn, her uncle had offered tours to locals and visitors, though he had stopped the practice years before his fall. The Summerfields had come on more than one occasion and were always kind to both Abigail and her uncle. “You came with your granddaughter, if I recall.”

“Yes, indeed.” Mrs. Summerfield said. “Oh, it was thrilling. Absolutely thrilling. And I’m so glad we did it while we still could. I hardly think I could make the journey up those steps now. My husband even less likely than me.”

She let out a little laugh, and Abigail’s expression relaxed into a near-smile. “How is your granddaughter?”

“Oh, she and Mr. Causey are as happy as can be, of course.” The woman beamed. “They are visiting her mother in Town for the next few weeks, but I expect they will return soon. Because…” She lowered her voice, her eyes aglow. “They have told me it will not be just the two of them at Leighton House for much longer.”

Abigail was pleased for the young couple, and the forthcoming great grandparents. They deserved all the happiness in the world, if only for the goodness with which they treated others.

“Please pass along my good wishes to them,” Abigail said.

Mrs. Summerfield nodded. “I will. I have written to them of your marriage. I’m sure they will be most pleased. Now, tell me, is your new husband sharing in the workload?”

Just then, the door opened, and the gentlemen joined them.

“Oh, you cannot answer truthfully now,” Mrs. Summerfield continued in a rushed whisper. “You had best wait until he is gone for you to tell me how terribly idle he really is.”

She winked, and Abigail's lips stretched into a smile. Her mood had certainly improved.

She glanced to the door; her eyes fixated on Gavin. To her pleasure, he headed straight in her direction.

But then Mrs. Stedman stood, cutting off his advancement with her daughter swiftly in tow.

"Oh, Captain, did you enjoy the port? My Constance chose it. She has fine taste, does she not?"

Abigail's bettering mood vanished instantly, sinking further as the night progressed, for with each giggle from Miss Stedman in response to Gavin's words—each wide-eyed, affectionate stare she bestowed on him—Abigail's insecurities rose.

She had always dreamed of having a loving marriage, with children to help cultivate that love to be even greater. But she was foolish to have ever hoped that she and Gavin would have such a marriage. He could never desire a lighthouse keeper over a lady.

As the others conversed, she moved soundlessly to the edge of the room. She tried to gain her bearings, to separate the truth from the lies, but her fears blurred the lines.

"Abigail?"

She started at Gavin's deep voice behind her.

"Are you well?" he asked.

She turned to face him, all too aware of Miss Stedman's eyes upon them from across the room.

"Of course," she responded.

He did not look convinced. "Have you enjoyed the evening so far?"

What could she say? That she had despised nearly every moment? That she longed to return home and never see any of these people—excepting the Summerfields—again?

She drew a deep breath. Perhaps she could be honest with him. He would certainly understand. "In truth, Gavin, I—"

"Captain," Mrs. Stedman called, "I must speak with you."

They looked across the room to where the woman watched him expectantly. Gavin turned to Abigail, offering his arm, but she did not take it.

"*You* have been summoned, Captain," she said. "Not I."

She turned away, instantly regretting her refusal.

But she could not bear to be near Mrs. Stedman any longer, nor her daughter's ever-watchful, ever-flirtatious eyes.

She listened as Gavin departed from her, and soon Mrs. Stedman spoke up again.

"Captain Kendricks and I are in agreement," the woman said, her voice ending the other conversations about the room. "We desire

entertainment. Mrs. Kendricks?"

Panic gripped Abigail's throat. She turned to face her. "Yes?"

"As you are the newest member of our party, I think it only fair that you pleasure us first with the pianoforte. What song will you play?"

The rubies on Mrs. Stedman's necklace shimmered from the glow of the candles, but her eyes were void of any light. The woman knew Abigail could not play. There was no room for such an instrument in the lighthouse. Mrs. Stedman meant to embarrass her. Abigail was sure of it. Just as before, just like always.

Abigail looked to Gavin. Had he been aware that the woman was going to ask her to play? He couldn't be. He would not intentionally embarrass her like that. But when he said nothing to save her from her clear discomfort, nausea swirled within her.

"I am not musical, ma'am, as you well know," she said in a flat tone. "I choose to occupy my time with more useful engagements."

"Oh, what a tragedy to have never learned," Mrs. Rennalls piped in, leaning to Mrs. Biddle and whispering, "I shall take it upon myself to teach her."

"If you have nothing musical to offer," Mrs. Stedman said, quirking her head to one side, "perhaps you could recite a poem, or read a passage from a favorite novel?"

Abigail shook her head in silence. How she longed to scream out, to tell the whole room of the unjustness of the woman. But she knew she would be misunderstood. The unladylike keeper of Golowduyn Lighthouse would be made to look hysterical—and Mrs. Stedman would be made the victim.

"Well, worry not, my honored guests," Mrs. Stedman said. "My Constance will not deny us the pleasure of listening to *her* play." She turned adoring eyes on her daughter. "Come, show us what a blessing it is to play the pianoforte so beautifully. Captain Kendricks, I am certain you in particular will enjoy her talent. My daughter truly has a voice that makes even the angels in heaven envious."

Mr. Biddle exchanged a disapproving look with his wife.

The guests gathered near the pianoforte, sitting in the chairs arranged before the instrument, but Abigail only managed a few steps forward before stopping behind the others.

Miss Stedman took her place behind the pianoforte, humbly bowing her head. Her fingers rested upon the keys before she began her performance.

Abigail glanced to Gavin who stood a few couples away from her. He motioned to the empty seat near him, the seat he'd obviously saved for her, but she remained where she was.

"What is the matter?" he mouthed out.

She ignored him, turning to stare out the darkened window, though the room was far too bright to see anything beyond the reflections of the candlelight flickering in the glass.

How could she explain to Gavin that everything was the matter, that *she* was the matter? She should never have come to Pryvly House.

Whispers nearby reached her ears. She pretended not to hear Mrs. Stedman's words to Mrs. Rennalls, but Abigail could no longer avoid listening as her name and bits of the conversation floated toward her.

"Miss Moore…sorry state of affairs before the captain…couldn't afford to…uncle didn't teach…she cannot read."

The cruelty of the words penetrated the walls Abigail had built around her heart. She had tried to remain at the party for Gavin, but now, she could not see the point in remaining as his eyes focused on Miss Stedman's playing.

Abigail had been a fool to think she could ever make a marriage work with such a man, knowing where she came from, the tarnished state of her family. Her thoughts spiraled deeper and deeper. Black spots in her eyes dimmed the light around her. Her palms were sweaty. The pianoforte's music rang shrilly in her ears.

She couldn't bear to remain there another moment. She needed to leave before the tears in her eyes fell down her cheeks, before she collapsed onto the carpet from sheer humiliation.

Turning on the spot, she fled from the room as quietly as she could, though she no longer cared if heads turned. She paused in the hallway, looking left and right, wondering which way led to freedom. Finally recognizing the paintings to one side, she picked up her yellow skirts and ran through Pryvly House, darting past a flustered footman, opening the door herself, and running out into the darkness.

Her lungs burned, but her breathing was deep for the first time that evening as she left the confines of the house farther and farther behind.

Once she reached the countryside, she finally slowed her pace. The moon lit the pathway before her, but she did not need its waning light to know the way home.

She only needed to follow the sound of the sea.

It called to her, beckoned her forward to a place she could find peace and freedom. That was where she belonged. At Golowduyn, beneath its light, near the waves and upon the cliffsides.

Not in a world of fine clothing and gossip.

No matter how kind Mrs. Summerfield had been, no matter how Gavin had tried to help Abigail fit in…she would never belong.

"Abigail? Abigail!"

Alarm struck her core at Gavin's voice. He sounded close. *Too* close. What might he say to her? He most certainly felt embarrassment

over her abrupt departure, perhaps even anger that she'd surely created a scene.

"Abigail? Please, wait."

His voice soft. Was he not angry then? She certainly would not blame him if he was.

"I am sorry, Gavin. I needed to return to Golowduyn. The lamps will need refilling soon."

"Is that why you left?" he asked, reaching her side. "Because of the lighthouse?"

She couldn't answer. A fresh wave of sorrow spilled over her conscience at his clear attempt to understand her actions. The darkness hid her tears sliding down her cheeks, but she dared not look up at him.

He continued. "You should have told me. We could have left together. Even earlier, if you wished."

Her temples pounded. Regret filled her every nerve. Though, she could not have told Gavin everything. That would mean admitting to Mrs. Stedman's plan—and acknowledging Abigail's humiliation at seeing it coming to fruition.

She felt something soft against her arm. Gavin extended her shawl —new from Mrs. Follett's—toward her. She'd left in such a hurry, she'd forgotten it. She accepted the wrap, grasping the folds of fine fabric in her hand and allowing the rest to trail in the air behind her.

She needed to talk to him, to be honest. He would understand. He had to understand. "I did not leave early because I was worried about the lighthouse."

He was silent for a moment. "Then why did you? The others were no doubt surprised by your abrupt departure."

So he *was* embarrassed by her actions. The knowledge hammered another nail in the barrier surrounding her heart.

"Did you leave because you no longer wished to be there?" he asked.

"No, of course not. Well, perhaps a little. But I…I left because I do not belong there."

"At Pryvly House? Why would you not?"

She struggled to find the right words to explain. Of course Gavin could not understand her feelings. How could he, when he belonged everywhere, with everyone?

"Abigail," he said, a hint of frustration in his tone, "I am striving for patience, but I must confess, I cannot understand why you are so unkind to the Stedmans."

Her feet stopped. Her eyes narrowed as she turned toward him.

She could barely see his face through the shadows. "Why *I* am unkind to *them*?"

“Well, yes. You spoke very little to either of them, you hardly touched your food, you refused to share a poem, denying their efforts to include you. And now you leave without a word to anyone, in the middle of Miss Stedman’s performance? It is bad form, Abigail. Surely you see this.”

Abigail couldn’t believe what she was hearing. Gavin was truly siding with the Stedmans? Her nostrils flared. “You have the audacity to say I have behaved badly…and mention nothing of how Mrs. Stedman has treated me?”

“How *has* she treated you, Abigail? Please, enlighten me, as I have found nothing adverse with her conduct at all.”

Her defenses doubled. Any guilt she had felt before over leaving early, over causing Gavin embarrassment, vanished and was quickly replaced with anger.

“Of course you did not see it,” she said, her tone low and biting. “You were far too occupied with Miss Stedman to notice anything else.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Why do you not return to the party and enjoy Miss Stedman’s presence while the night is young? You clearly prefer her well-bred elegance to anything I could ever be.”

“What do you mean?”

She could not deny his innocent tone, but she still backed away from him. “You and I both know Miss Stedman is vastly superior to me in every way. I see that now…and that I will never be enough for you.”

Her words tasted bitter, even to her own tongue, but she could not hold them back. With a final shake of her head, she raised her skirts and sailed across the grass, praying for swift, clean footing across the unstable land.

Tears burned her eyes, her side ached with pain, but she refused to stop. And as Golowduyn’s light appeared in the distance, she ran toward the safety of her home. Once inside, she climbed the stairs, her pace slowing step-by-step until finally, she reached the top of the tower.

With a deep breath, she opened the door.

Lieutenant Harris stood from the cot, his eyebrows drawn high in surprise. “Mrs. Kendricks? I did not expect you to…Has something happened, ma’am?”

She tried to catch her breath. “No, sir. I must thank you for your help this evening, but we will no longer need you to watch over the lamps. Tonight, or in future.”

“Have I done something wrong, Mrs. Kendricks?” he asked. His cheery countenance had disappeared. “I have only now just checked

the lamps, and everything seems to be in proper order. I—"

"No," she said. "This is in no way because of you. I will simply be remaining at Golowduyn from this point forth."

She could feel his hesitation but could say nothing more. She was too overcome with guilt for dismissing him.

"Very well," he said after a moment. "Goodnight, ma'am."

She ignored his dejected tone. She was right to relieve him of his service. She had every intention of remaining at the lighthouse forevermore, at least while the lamps required lighting. This was her home, the only thing she needed to be happy. If Gavin required more to be satisfied, then he was free to attend other parties. But she would no longer go with him.

She turned to the watch room window, dropping her shawl onto the cot and folding her arms as she watched Golowduyn's light shining above the ocean.

Soon, loud footsteps echoed up the stairs, interrupting her solitude. "Abigail!"

Her courage nearly vanished, but she squared her shoulders. She had done nothing wrong. And Gavin would soon find that out.

He entered the room in the next moment, his eyes narrowed furiously and his jaw tight. "Abigail, did you dismiss Lieutenant Harris?"

"Yes."

His voice boomed in the quiet room. "Why?"

"Because I will not be attending another dinner party."

He took a step toward her, his broad chest heaving. "How can you say something so absurd?"

She whirled around to face him, his words striking a chord of pain within her. "Is it absurd to want to keep myself from cruel words and unkind actions?"

"I assume you refer to Mrs. Stedman again?"

"Of course I refer to her. You must have been blind, indeed, not to have noticed the woman throwing her daughter's accomplishments at your feet throughout the evening. And you must be oblivious to have not heard their slights about my appearance and lack of accomplishments."

Gavin stared at her, clearly confused before he held his hands in the air as if to secede.

"Very well. We need not quarrel over what was said or done any longer. I merely…Abigail, can you not move past these affronts? You will make yourself miserable by dwelling on them."

"Miserable?" Angry tears sprouted in her eyes. Surely he did not mean what he said. Surely he spoke out of irritation. But then, even if he did, that did not stop the hurt and pain that spilled forth from her

words. “You dare speak to me of misery when you know not what it is to experience it? You don’t know what the state of my life was before Golowduyn. At school, I was scolded, shamed, beaten, and scarred—physically and emotionally—simply because of my parents’ choices.”

She took a step toward him, whispering with vehemence, her tears spilling down her cheeks. “I am far happier alone at Golowduyn than I could ever be prancing about in front of others. Especially the Stedmans. They, just like everyone else, have treated me in a disgusting manner. And I refuse to fall prey to it any longer.”

Gavin was silent for a moment, staring at the floor. But when his eyes raised to meet hers, she could see his own hurt reflected in their dark depths.

“Do I treat you in the same manner, Abigail?” he asked. “Do you not see how I care for you?”

She looked away, too afraid to respond with what she prayed was the truth, fearing that it wasn’t.

“If you do not,” he continued, “then what are we doing here?”

She shook her head. “I do not know, Captain.”

She waited, hoping, praying he would say something more, something to breach the barricades around her heart. But his footsteps retreated down the stairs, and she was left alone with an ache in her heart she was sure would never leave.

Chapter Ten

Abigail awoke the next morning with a dull ache in her temples. She had spent a restless night in the frigid watch room, waking up disoriented before memories of the previous night flooded her mind.

She extinguished the lamps and trimmed the wicks as light poured in through the windows of the lamp room. The sun warmed her cold, aching limbs, but she hardly felt it as regret consumed her. She knew Gavin would have understood her actions had he simply known the truth. But her fears and humiliation had prevented her from speaking clearly with him.

She took the stairs slowly, dreading the mere thought of facing Gavin when she reached the bottom. She would have to apologize for her behavior. She would have to be honest—even if knowing Mrs. Stedman's words about Abigail caused Gavin to discover his mistake in marrying her. For not only was she unaccomplished and unbecoming, she was also unladylike.

She reached the bottom of the stairs and heard a rhythmic hammering coming from the sitting room. She moved slowly forward. She knew she must look a sorry sight. She had not changed last night out of her yellow gown, and her hair had all but fallen out of its pins.

She would have changed before approaching Gavin, but she did not want things to remain strained between them any longer. She could not bear his unhappiness, or for him to think she didn't appreciate the things he had done for them, so she made her way to the sitting room and stood in the doorway, unnoticed as he worked.

He hammered a new slab of wood into the floor near the back window. The old piece had been long since warped from rain water that spilled in during storms. She hadn't mentioned it needed fixing, yet he had noticed it still.

His jacket lay on the back of a nearby chair, and his waistcoat was unfasted at the top, though it still stretched over his broad shoulders.

She cleared her throat. “Gavin?”

He stopped for a moment to look up at her with a blank stare. He hardly seemed aware of her unkempt appearance. She hesitated, unsure of where to begin. An apology? A confession? Begging for forgiveness?

Before she could even begin, a knock sounded at the door. “Are you expecting someone?”

He shook his head in silence.

She stared down the hallway, afraid to move. How could she answer the door looking in such a way? And even worse, what if the Stedmans were behind the door, coming to comfort Gavin after his wife’s rude departure? They would surely be there to show him that Miss Stedman, a true lady, would never have behaved in such a way.

Her blood boiled at the thought. She’d had just about enough of the Stedmans. Yes, she would tell Gavin everything—just as soon as she chased the women off of her property.

Images of her brandishing a broom overhead flashed in her mind just before she opened the door. But to her surprise, another woman stood before her.

“Mrs. Summerfield,” she greeted, pulling back in pleasant surprise. She much preferred a visit from *this* woman. She was not here to steal away her husband.

“Good morning, Mrs. Kendricks,” she greeted. Her cheeks were rosy from the cool morning air.

“Do come in.” She allowed the woman inside.

As Abigail led the way to the sitting room, she smoothed down her skirts self-consciously.

Gavin stood as they entered. “Good morning,” he greeted with a bow. “To what do we owe the pleasure?”

Mrs. Summerfield glanced between them. “Well, I have come to speak with Mrs. Kendricks, if I may.”

Abigail swallowed. She was going to be confronted about last night. Would Mrs. Summerfield tell her how displeased the whole party was with her behavior, as well?

She caught Gavin’s eyes upon her, as if he silently asked if she wished to be left alone. She gave a discreet nod before he gathered his jacket and excused himself.

When Gavin had left the house, Abigail motioned for Mrs. Summerfield to take a seat near the crackling fire.

“I must apologize for coming so early, Mrs. Kendricks, and with no notice,” Mrs. Summerfield began as she sat across from her. “I will not speak for long, as I know you are busy.”

A curl fell across Abigail’s brow, and she quickly smoothed it aside.

Mrs. Summerfield, in comparison to Abigail's disheveled look, appeared very much like a painting. She sat with her hands folded in her lap, feet tucked to the side of her and back straight. Her hair was smooth, and she had a lively look to her eyes. However, she made no notion that she disapproved of Abigail's appearance at all.

Still, Abigail fidgeted with the lace above her shoulder. "What did you wish to speak with me about?"

"Well, after you left in such a hurry, I wanted to look after you to ensure you were well."

Abigail forced a pleasant look. "Oh, of course. I merely left to see to the light." Her words were not entirely untrue.

"I see." Mrs. Summerfield didn't appear to be convinced. "I thought you might have left because of Mrs. Stedman's words, during her daughter's performance."

Abigail's ears burned. She did not know anyone else had heard.

"I'm sure I can hardly remember what was said."

"Then you are a better woman than I am, Mrs. Kendricks," Mrs. Summerfield stated, shaking her head. "She was cruel. Such things should never be spoken, especially concerning a guest in her own home. I really must apologize for her behavior, and for not standing up to her myself the moment it occurred."

Abigail's brow rose. "Oh, please, don't apologize. You were the one person last night who made me forget about my miserable state in that awful home."

She blushed at her blunt words, but Mrs. Summerfield's expression softened.

"I understand," she said. "After you left, the party dispersed, and I was very grateful. Mrs. Stedman is fine in smaller doses, I have come to discover."

Abigail's defenses lowered, relieved the woman was not there to chastise her. They sat in silence before Mrs. Summerfield stood.

"Well, as I said, I do not wish to take too much of your time." She paused, hesitating only a moment before saying, "Mrs. Kendricks, if ever you need a friend, know that you have one in me. And my granddaughter, as well."

"Thank you, Mrs. Summerfield, for your kindness. I admit, it has been much needed today."

At the woman's caring smile, Abigail cleared her throat before any of the tears welling in her eyes could be shed. And all thoughts of her untidiness vanished as she led Mrs. Summerfield from the lighthouse.

Gavin wished he could have stayed in the sitting room to hear the conversation that had taken place between Abigail and Mrs. Summerfield, especially when he saw the two women embracing

outside of the house before Mrs. Summerfield rode away in her carriage.

He stood at the side of the lighthouse, his progress in painting the door of the oil hutch halted as he watched Abigail wave goodbye to the carriage before she turned back to the house. Their eyes met, and Gavin pulled his attention back to door. Sliding the paintbrush up and down in smooth strokes, he waited as she walked up to him in silence.

"How was your visit?" he asked with a glance in her direction. She did not look angry, nor happy. In fact, she looked surprisingly placid as she leaned against the house with her fingers interlaced before her. Though her hair hung to the side and her ribbon was missing from around her waist, she was still appealing. Just as she always was.

"It was pleasant," Abigail replied.

"And how is Mrs. Summerfield?"

"She is well." She said nothing more.

Gavin refused to be reeled into the conversation further. If Abigail wished to say something more, then she could do so on her own. He would not press her for more information.

"What did she wish to speak with you about?" Blast his curiosity.

"She wanted to see if I was well after last night."

"I see."

"Gavin?"

He looked away from the oil hutch. Her soft tone threatened to ease the anger still simmering from the night before. "Yes?"

"I would like to apologize for last night," she began. "I did not intend to leave Pryvly House in such a manner. But things escalated rather quickly, and I am sorry for it."

Her apology instantly humbled him, and his own words spoken in anger promptly came to the forefront of his mind. He dropped his brush into the small tin of paint nearby and wiped his hands on a rag.

"I am sorry, as well," he said, approaching her. "I should not have spoken so unkindly."

"I understand why you did."

He hesitated. "Yes, but, Abigail, I still do not understand why *you* did."

"I know. Which is why I should like to explain now, if you have a moment."

He tossed the rag across his shoulder and folded his arms comfortably across his chest. "Of course, I am happy to listen."

Her blue eyes dropped as she moved the grass back and forth nearby with the tip of her boot. "I fear the dinner party was fated to end in such a way. My defenses were on the rise the moment they delivered the invitation. You see, I overheard Mrs. Stedman speaking

to her daughter before I answered the door. She said that…" A redness slowly crept across her cheeks. "She said that you would one day grow tired of me as your wife, and that you would seek comfort in the arms of another. Namely, her daughter."

Gavin arms fell to his sides, his eyebrows low. "She said that?"

"Yes. She did."

Her words were firm, and Gavin knew at once that she spoke the truth. And yet, he could hardly believe it. How could the woman dare to speak such things? To even *think* such things? "I…I had no idea."

Abigail cast him a dubious look. "You mean you did not take notice of Mrs. Stedman's marked comments about her daughter's accomplishments, simply to outshine my own abilities—or lack thereof?"

"Well, most mothers behave in the same regard," he said, still trying to make sense of her words. "I thought she merely spoke in such a way for Mr. Burke to take notice of Miss Stedman."

"Mr. Burke?" She sniffed out a derisive laugh. "Did Mrs. Stedman speak to the gentleman once last evening? Did her daughter even spare him a glance?"

Gavin held a hand to his brow. How could he have been so stupid? Was he utterly blind, completely oblivious, just as Abigail had suggested?

He looked up at her, remorse settling heavily on his heart. "Abigail, I am so sorry. Truly. I had no idea of her intentions. When I think of what I said last night in her defense…knowing that she…" He let out a sigh, his words unwilling to formulate. "How she could behave in such a way is beyond me."

But Abigail did not look surprised. "I do not blame you for not noticing. Her remarks are always very subtle. But I told you before that she has been upset ever since my uncle did not accept her advances. She lashed out, though, hurting *me*, instead of my uncle. I would not be surprised if she assumed that I was the real cause of his rejecting her." Her eyes stared out to the sea, though she didn't seem to focus on anything in particular. "I was once invited to attend a gathering at Pryvly House to celebrate her daughter's birthday. Mostly, it was just a way for them to flaunt their wealth before other families who were not as affluent.

"I was rather nervous and did not wish to go, but Uncle said it would help ease the tension between our families. But I knew the moment I arrived that was not to be. Mrs. Stedman wished to make an example of me. She allowed the girls to tease me about my new dress, specially made for the occasion. She told me that clothing could not hide my many flaws, and that I was an unwanted orphan using a dress to keep my past a secret."

Gavin shook his head in disgust. To have such things be said to Abigail when she was only a little girl made the blood sear in his veins. And suddenly, his wife's actions made sense.

"That was why you wore the dress you did last night," he said, "instead of one of your finer gowns."

Abigail lowered her head. "Yes, and still, the woman mentioned it, hinting that I had sewn it myself because of its simplicity. I really should not allow her words to affect me as they do. But it seemed that each time she spoke last evening, she merely wished to add to my discomfort. Mentioning Golowduyn's size compared to Pryvly House, saying I had not been taught to read, speaking of my destitution, and of—"

"She said you could not read?"

Abigail said nothing. But then, she didn't have to. He could see the truth already in her blue eyes.

His fists clenched together. He should have noticed. He should have defended Abigail last night, not shouted at her for running away from a home in which she was clearly being mistreated.

"I am sorry to have ever suggested going there," he said, shame hardened in his stomach. "You may rest assured that we will never attend a dinner party in their home again. Please, forgive my foolishness in not seeing her true nature…and for not believing you from the start."

Their eyes met, and he prayed she would see the earnestness of his apology. Finally, she nodded. "Of course I forgive you, Gavin. And I…I am sorry to have embarrassed you with my unladylike behavior."

He took a step toward her, instantly shaking his head. "In no way have you embarrassed me, Abigail. You handled her criticism as gracefully as any fine lady. You did not retaliate, and that is something Mrs. Stedman could certainly never do. In truth, you behaved more ladylike than any of the women in attendance last evening."

With a softness he had never seen before in her eyes, Abigail stared up at him. Her pretty freckles lit in a blush.

"Thank you for understanding," she said softly.

She seemed to hesitate a moment before closing the distance between them and reaching up to bestow a kiss on his cheek. The affection was fleeting, and she immediately scurried back to the house without another glance in his direction, her hair flopping to one side and bouncing as she moved.

Gavin's heart stumbled.

The feel of her soft lips on his skin, the flutter of breath on his cheeks, lingered long after her kiss had occurred, as did the memory of her strength and goodness. She was a remarkable woman, indeed.

And he had every intention of sharing the fact with the rest of the world—especially with Mrs. Stedman and her daughter.

* * *

After their conversation, Abigail and Gavin reached a new understanding in their relationship, gaining a deeper trust between them. To have Gavin validate her feelings, to have his support and belief, meant everything to Abigail. And though the niggling thought in the back of her mind reminded her that she still had secrets to reveal, she could not deny the peace that had entered into their marriage.

The next day, Lieutenant Harris returned to Golowduyn with the slate for the roof that had arrived in town that morning. As they unloaded the supplies from the back of a cart they had borrowed, Abigail apologized for dismissing him and asked him to continue looking after the light, should they need his help again.

He readily agreed, much to Abigail's relief, and her heart soared when she saw Gavin's pleased look behind him. But when she caught sight of Lieutenant Harris's smile fading away, a wariness draped a shadow over her joy.

"What is it?" she asked, exchanging a glance with Gavin, who faced the lieutenant, as well.

"I did not have the chance to tell you last night," the man said, "but as darkness fell, I went down the stairs for a brief moment for a cup of tea. I heard the chickens squawking outside, and when I looked into the henhouse, I discovered a feral cat."

Abigail pulled a face. "A cat?" That was not so bad. She thought a ship had nearly wrecked upon the shores, or perhaps the lamps had blown out. A cat was nothing terrible.

The lieutenant nodded. "I opened the gate and managed to scare the animal away, but when I looked to mend the hole it had used to get in, I couldn't find one. It was almost as if the animal had opened and closed the latch itself…Or someone else had put it in there altogether."

Abigail's stomach did a funny turn. Any relief she had felt before had vanished.

She looked over her shoulder to see the chickens happily pecking away at the grain on the ground.

"Who would do such a thing?" she asked. She caught a quick glance shared between Gavin and Lieutenant Harris. "What is it? Do you know who did it?"

Gavin rubbed a hand against his shoulder. "I do wonder if Myles Sanders might have had something to do with it."

Abigail stared. "Because he is still upset with you? Would he do

such a thing?"

"If Myles was willing to set fire to a ship," Lieutenant Harris said, "and tamper with the anchor cables, I would not be surprised if he was behind this, as well, ma'am."

The corner of her lip pulled in. What a ridiculous thing to do, to harass chickens in such a way. Thank heavens he hadn't harmed the horses or any of their property, or…

A sudden thought occurred, a sinking in her chest. "Gavin, our boat?"

He slowly nodded. "I considered the very same."

The boy had purposefully allowed their boat to become destroyed by the waves, simply because he held a grudge against Gavin? She couldn't believe anyone could be so petty, nor so reckless. She reminded herself that the boy's brother had just died, but still, she found pity difficult to come by when Myles had put other's lives at risk by destroying the boat they used to save others.

"First our boat, now the chickens," she murmured. "What will be next?"

"Hopefully nothing," Gavin said.

But as he and Lieutenant Harris exchanged another glance, her agitation grew.

Throughout the rest of the day, her thoughts centered entirely on Myles and if he truly was the culprit—though she knew it was very unlikely to be anyone but the begrudging boy.

She did not have the chance to speak more about it with Gavin, however, as he had spent most of the day taking off the old slate from the roof, while Lieutenant Harris had gathered the broken pieces and tossed them in the cart they would use again tomorrow.

Abigail had stayed busy by remaining indoors and helping the Honeysetts in the kitchen. Thankfully, the woman and her rather loquacious daughter helped distract her from the unsettling news of Myles Sanders and his actions.

When dinner time arrived, Abigail stood on the landing outside, waiting for Gavin to put his tools away in the shed. She watched Lieutenant Harris and the Honeysetts depart from Golowduyn, catching sight of Poppy's reddened cheeks as the lieutenant peered down at her. His jovial laughter—caused by something Poppy had said—soon drifted on the air toward her, and she watched them curiously before a horse and rider approached, drawing her attention.

"Captain Kendricks?" the man asked, reining in just as Gavin emerged from the shed.

He extended a letter to Gavin—who handed the postman a couple of coins from his pocket—before the man set off in a quick dash.

"Who is it from?" Abigail asked, curious as his face brightened.

“My brother. He has finally accepted our invitation and will be here within a fortnight.”

“Invitation?”

“Yes, I’ve been waiting weeks without any word from him.”

“What do you mean?”

His smiled faltered. “Did I forget to mention that I invited him to stay with us?”

Abigail’s mouth hung open. “Yes, I’m afraid you did.”

“Forgive me. I must have been distracted to have let that slip my mind. I really thought I had mentioned it to you.”

As the information settled, all thought of Myles vanished, her mind struggling instead with coming to terms with Gavin’s news. Of course, he had every right to invite his family to stay there. Golowduyn was his home, as well. However…

“How are we to house them?” she asked, forcing a lightness to her tone, though she felt nothing but worry. “And provide for them?”

“Well, their two sons will remain with their grandparents in Gloucestershire, so we shall only have to accommodate for Lionel and his wife. My brother will be more than appeasing. And Gertrude,” he paused with a chuckle, “I’m certain she will adjust within a matter of days with the help of her servants.”

“Servants?” Abigail repeated, her voice nearly squeaking. “Do we have the room for them or…or your family?”

“We can manage. It will only be for a few weeks at the most.”

His nonchalant manner chipped at her accommodating behavior.

She was happy Gavin would be able to see his brother after so many years apart…but something bothered her, another fear deep within her soul.

Gavin’s brother and his wife would be more proper than even Gavin himself. They must have already formed an opinion of her—the poor lighthouse keeper destined for the workhouse, saved by the charity of their foolish brother.

She had only just escaped the clutches of the self-doubt the Stedmans had thrust upon her.

How was she to manage falling right back into those same feelings again?

But then, she knew how she would manage—she would simply remember her husband and what he’d done for her, and then welcome his family with open arms. Even if they did highly object to her being married to their brother.

Suppressing a sigh, Abigail faced Gavin with a smile that she hoped appeared more natural than it felt. “Your family is, of course, more than welcome to stay here with us, Gavin. But let us discuss the matter later. Do excuse me.”

She walked past him, but instead of moving toward the house, she headed for the shed.

"Where are you going?" Gavin called after her.

She disappeared within the small structure before returning with a fishing rod and a small pail of bait.

"Fishing," she responded simply.

"Now?" He stared at her, clearly confused. "Is dinner not ready?"

"It is," she said, walking past him and motioning to the house with a toss of her head. "You may go enjoy the meal while it is warm. I'll return before the lamps must be lit."

"Can you not fish another time?"

She set off across the cliffside, but Gavin kept up with her pace.

"Yes, but I'd rather do so now."

He regarded her inquisitively. "Are you fishing now so you may avoid speaking with me about how you truly feel concerning my family's visit—as well as hoping that the sea will bring you the peace you so desire?"

Since when had the man become so astute? There really was no point in lying now, not when he'd guessed so accurately. "Perhaps."

They reached the slope that led to the beach, and Gavin stopped. "Then…shall I leave you be?"

She stopped a few paces in front of him. Being alone would certainly allow her the opportunity to think more about his family coming. But that was not necessarily a good thing. And, truth be told, she would never say no to spending more time with Gavin.

She resumed walking down the slope, speaking over her shoulder. "I would not mind if you joined me."

With how observant he had been before, she was certain he would be able to see how desperately she wished for his company.

Sure enough, he quickened his pace and reached her side in a matter of moments, sending a pleased smile in her direction.

Before long, they reached the boat they had borrowed from Mr. Honeysett—their new one set to arrive in just a few days—and after Abigail tucked the fishing rod securely beneath the seat, they heaved the small vessel toward the sea.

Soft waves lapped at her skirts before she jumped into the boat.

She expected Gavin to join her, but he motioned for her to move to the seat facing forward.

"I'll row, if you'd like me to," he said.

Abigail's mouth parted in surprise. She had only ever been in a boat alone or with her uncle—and even then, she had almost always rowed while he did the fishing. Though, she should not have been surprised by Gavin's offer. She knew how much he loved to help.

She conceded with a nod, and switched seats before Gavin

jumped in, splashing droplets of water across her knees.

He guided them farther into the water, and Abigail tried not to stare at him, though she failed miserably at the task.

Gavin's jacket and cravat had been left behind at the house. A few buttons of his waistcoat were unfastened, allowing his shirt to fall open, and she struggled to keep her eyes from straying to the top of his sculpted chest.

Her thoughts wandered to that night so long ago when he had stood shirtless in her dining room. She would never have guessed that the wounded captain would one day become her husband.

"May I ask you what worries you most about my family coming?"

Abigail blinked. How long had she been staring? She glanced around them. They'd moved past the cliffsides and most of the larger waves and now sailed through lilting waters.

"A number of things worry me, I suppose," she responded, attempting to gather her wits—her eyes continuing to trail across his chest, shoulders, and muscular forearms as he leisurely rolled the oars through the water. "That they will be unhappy at Golowduyn. That they and their servants will not fit. That they will not like our humble home or…or me."

She expected him to laugh. She would have laughed herself, were she not so sensitive to the issue.

But to her surprise, he merely stared at her. "Abigail, how could they not love you?"

His eyes lingered on her. Her breath caught in her throat. Did he mean…Was he saying…No. She mentally shook herself. No, they were simple words. Nothing more.

And yet, suddenly, her troubles did not seem so very great at all. The tension in her body slowly slipped away, and her hands rested comfortably in her lap. She quite enjoyed not rowing, taking in her surroundings without the burning sensation in the muscles of her arms and legs.

The sun shimmered against the silvery-blue water, light reflecting in a straight line across the sea. Seagulls circled nearby, their calls sounding out against the forgiving waves.

She peered down at the calm water softly lapping at the boat. A few curls of hair refused to stay pinned back any longer, falling forward and tickling her temples.

She reached over the side of the boat, allowing her fingers to glide through the cold water as Gavin led them forward.

"So you *do* know how to relax."

She looked up, becoming acutely aware of his brown eyes watching her. "I have always known how, sir. I simply needed reminding."

A small wave splashed up her wrist, the cold exhilarating her senses, before a foreign, impish feeling arose within her. Before she could think twice about her actions, she cupped her fingers together, plunged her hand into the sea, and launched her arm forward.

Gavin gasped, ducking far too late as water soaked his chest and face. Dripping wet, he stared at her in silent bewilderment.

Abigail was just as surprised herself. She had only meant to tease him, but what if he thought her actions were rude? Would he be angry? Perhaps it *was* rather cruel of her to—

Her thoughts vanished as Gavin splashed water across her front in retaliation. She wiped the moisture from her eyes to see him shaking his hand free of the seawater still dripping from his fingers.

"I've had my revenge now," he said, his eyes shining brighter than the sun on the sea. "We are even."

"We are not. I am clearly wetter than you are."

He flashed a grin. "Well, you did start this. It is only fair that I finished it."

She made to protest again, but as his hand launched toward the water, hers did the same. They slapped the salty sea onto one another, yelping and grunting in surprise as the cold water covered their faces.

Finally, Abigail raised her hands in the air. "Stop," she cried out, breathless with laughter and exhilaration. "Stop!"

Gavin immediately stopped, his own deep laughter filling the air until his eyes dropped to the bottom of the boat. "We are going to sink with all of this water you have brought aboard, madam."

"If you recall, sir, I did not do this on my own."

She cast him a knowing look before she caught sight of something floating away in the water, and her eyes rounded. "Gavin, the oars!"

He turned, and together, they reached for the paddles. But their combined momentum caused the boat to tip too far, and they both slipped into the cold water.

Abigail held her breath. Her senses screamed as the frigid sea surrounded her. She swiped her arms through the water, but the movement of the waves pulled her body back and forth, preventing her from knowing the way to the surface. She tucked her legs in close to her chest, wrapping her arms around them, and waited until her body raised. Finally, she thrust her arms out and launched herself up toward the surface of the water.

Once she reached the air, she drew in a deep breath, wiping away the hair and moisture from her eyes and looking around her. Gavin emerged a moment later. He gave his head a single shake, and his wet hair slanted across his brow.

"Are you all right?" he asked, spitting water from his mouth. She nodded, and he motioned to the boat. "Stay here."

Abigail held onto the side of the boat as Gavin cut through the water with ease to where the oars had floated a few strokes away. He returned with the paddles in hand, tossing them inside before facing her with a raised brow.

"*Now* we are equally wet," he said.

A smile spread across her wet lips. "I am inclined to agree with you, sir."

A soft wave roved past them, their legs brushed against each other, and their eyes locked. Abigail's smile faded away. Her heart quickened, and her breath caught. She could no longer deny the desire she saw in Gavin's focused gaze. Not when it so clearly matched her own.

He reached out to hold her upper arm, and slowly, gently, he pulled her toward him through the water. She swallowed, her mind whirling with nervousness as his eyes dropped to her mouth.

She had longed for this moment, for Gavin's lips to finally be upon hers. Her feelings for the captain had always been of gratitude and admiration. But something else had been simmering in her heart —something far more powerful. Something in that moment that made her lips part and caused her very soul to tremble with anticipation.

His free hand trailed up her arm out of the water and over her shoulder. She blinked, struggling to remain control of her breathing. His caress moved to cradle the back of her neck with his fingertips.

She felt his gentle hand drawing her closer. She needed no further coaxing. But still, she waited for him as he moved forward a breath at a time. He tipped his head to one side. Her eyes fluttered to a close, and she waited eagerly, impatiently. Finally, his lips brushed against hers in a slow, lingering kiss.

Her breathing hitched. The feel of his mouth on hers sent pleasant tingles down the flesh of her back. He pulled away for a single moment—long enough for their eyes to meet, for her heart to cry out in want of his affection, for her mind to spin at the sight of his alluring half-smile—before he sailed toward her in a single, swift motion.

His lips pressed against hers with a warmth that infused her body. She could no longer feel the cold of the ocean—only Gavin's kiss remained.

Currents of freedom, of peace, curved around her heart as they floated weightless in the water. Gavin's hand moved down her back to encircle her waist. She released her hold of the boat to slide her arms around his neck. His responding sigh sent a thrill through her chest as their bodies floated as one in the sea.

She'd never felt so secure, so protected as Gavin held her in his embrace. She prayed that the moment might never end, and that

Gavin might never let her go.

Gavin could think of nothing else but Abigail—her soft lips on his, her arms around his neck, her feminine frame against his body.

His desire for her could not be satisfied. How he had longed for her kiss for their hearts to beat as one.

The words blared in his mind as loud as any canon. So powerfully, so acutely did he feel them, he could not deny their truth.

He loved her. He had fallen for her the moment she had rescued him from the sea. And the feeling had only grown with each moment he spent with her, each look they shared, each indication of her strength and tenacity through the adversity she'd faced in her life.

It was no wonder he loved her.

And yet, his feelings could not be shared. Not yet. He knew she felt something for him in return—he was even more certain as she fervently returned his kiss—but he could not risk the delicacy of their developing relationship by sharing something she was not quite ready to return.

So, for now, he would simply relish in the knowledge of his love for her. And he would focus on the taste of her sweet lips, and the feel of his heart as it swelled for the woman he loved.

Yes, he would keep his feelings to himself for as long as she needed him to. Because Abigail was more than worth the wait.

Abigail was breathless. She could taste the salty sea on their lips. The cold ocean began to numb her limbs. Still, she did not pull away. There was something in Gavin's kiss, some emotion behind his affection that prevented her from stopping. She longed to explore it, to discover for herself what he felt.

But when a small wave bumped into them, splashing cold water across her brow, she pulled back with a soft gasp.

Their eyes met, and a pleasing shiver coursed through her body.

"Perhaps we ought to dry off," Gavin said, his voice low, raspy.

His arm slid down her back, resting on her hip in the water before he released her altogether.

She removed her arms from around his neck, ignoring her desire to pull him straight back in for another kiss, and grasped onto the boat.

He reached for the boat with his other hand, moving up and down in the water before pulling himself into the rocking vessel. He extended his hand and helped her in with a swift pull up.

Once they were situated, Gavin rowed them back to shore.

"I suppose the fishing will have to wait," he said, quirking a brow in her direction. "Perhaps for when you are in a less mischievous mood."

She did not bother to curb her grin.

After they reached the shore and secured the boat, they headed for the lighthouse. She shivered as they reached the top of the cliffs, though the cold hardly registered in her mind. She was too busy recalling their kiss.

However, as they walked toward the shed with the fishing pole in her hand, a strange tapping noise reached her ears, and her brow furrowed. “What is that?”

Gavin glanced toward her. They followed the noise to the oil hutch, and a sinking in her stomach made her legs grow weak. The door stood wide open, swinging on one hinge as it bounced repeatedly against the side of the lighthouse.

She ran toward the hutch, standing in the doorway. Oil seeped into the grass outside of the small supply room. The floor glistened from the spillage. The three large vats—once holding the oil that was now spilled across the floor—boasted jagged slashes at the bottom of each metal container.

“None of this is salvageable,” she said as the air fled from her lungs. “All of it is gone.”

Gavin took a step forward, oil pooling around his boots. “Was the door locked?”

She looked around her before retrieving the broken lock from the grass nearby. “I know for certain that it was.”

Gavin could hear the trembling in Abigail’s voice.

But when she looked up at him, he was surprised to see anger—not worry—dimming her blue eyes.

“The boy has gone too far this time, Gavin,” she said with flared nostrils. “After all we have been through, to now risk losing Golowduyn simply because of this child and his selfish actions? I will not stand for it.”

Myles. Of course she was referring to Myles. Who else would be terrorizing them? He rubbed the back of his neck as she continued.

“How dare he do this? He must have been watching us, waiting for the perfect moment to strike. Does he not understand what he has done? How will we keep the ships away from Dulatha Cliffs without any oil for the lamps? How will any of them stay safe?”

Despite his own worry for the dismal circumstances, a strange amusement welled within him at her scrunched-up nose and lowered brow. She paced back and forth before him, so he rested a hand on the side of her shoulder to stop her. “Let us try to salvage what little oil we can from the bottom of the vats for this evening. Then I will ride to St. Just and request an urgent order for more.”

Abigail shrugged away from his touch and continued her marching in the grass. “No, *I* will ride to St. Just so I may seek the boy

out. First, I shall make him apologize. Then I shall drag him here—by the scruff of his neck, if needs be—and he shall be forced to clear away this mess. And I will next make him clean the henhouse, and then I will personally see to his—"

"Abigail." His lip twitched. The scene was too delightful. "I know you are upset, but—"

"He will not get away unpunished," she said, staring toward the stables. "No, I shall ride for him now."

She stormed off, and the humor of the situation vanished as he realized she was in earnest. "No, Abigail, you cannot confront him."

"Yes, I can. And I will."

He ran after her as she stomped through the grass, holding her arm and speaking firmly. "No, it will not help. You must remember how Myles reacted when I last spoke with him."

Gavin certainly did. It had taken days to remove the mess the boy had spat upon his jacket.

Abigail blinked, sense returning to her eyes.

"He is in a fragile state," he said. "Dangerous. I fear he may do something worse."

"Dangerous." Abigail scoffed. "I will show him 'dangerous' if he dares step foot near Golowduyn again."

Gavin pressed his lips together to avoid another grin. "I do not doubt it. And I promise you, we will resolve the matter later. For now, however, our priority lies with the oil and the lamps."

She nodded, and her shoulders visibly fell.

After tipping the vats sideways and managing to fill three pails of oil, Gavin helped Abigail carry them indoors. Then he rode for St. Just, leaving her safely behind the walls of Golowduyn and a locked door—all the while praying that Myles would have the sense to stay away.

For if Abigail saw him, he knew the boy would sorely pay.

Chapter Eleven

The vandalism of Golowduyn Lighthouse pressed heavily on their minds for days, despite their attempts to resolve the issue.

When new vats had been delivered and the oil replenished, they replaced the lock on the hutch and added a large bell that sounded out each time the door opened.

Gavin had spoken with Lieutenant Harris about the damage done to their property, and after an unproductive meeting with the local constable—who could not be bothered to do anything further than commiserate—Gavin and Lieutenant Harris had decided to keep watch themselves.

However, days later, the lieutenant came by to inform them that Myles had been fired from his work at the local farmer's and was spotted at the tavern in Camborne, many miles northeast of St. Just.

"I suppose that will be the last we see of him then," Gavin said. "He has nothing to keep him here any longer."

But Abigail and Lieutenant Harris had exchanged unconvinced glances.

Still, knowing the boy had departed eased Abigail's mind, and her worries gradually shifted to the impending arrival of Gavin's family.

She knew Gavin looked forward to his brother's visit, but she struggled with feelings of dread as she prepared for them—purchasing extra candles, dishware, and new bedding, and cleaning the lighthouse from top to bottom alongside Poppy and Mrs. Honeysett.

When the day finally arrived, Abigail stood in the doorway of Golowduyn, Gavin at her side. The rain poured in droves across the land that morning, fitting for Abigail's mood as she moved through the checklist in her mind. She was sure she had forgotten something. Or perhaps it was just her apprehension rearing its head.

"Did you remember to bring your clothing into my room?" she asked.

"Yes, you helped me. And my trunk and other belongings are in

there, as well."

She nodded. That was certainly one thing she would not forget—Gavin sharing her room with her.

When Abigail had realized that all the rooms would be spoken for during the visit—Gavin's room for Gertrude and Lionel, the study for the female servants, and the circular room for the men—she had asked Gavin where he was planning to stay.

"The watch room will suffice," he had said.

But Abigail had instantly protested. The room was far too cold, and they both knew it. There was nothing else to do but offer her own room.

"You ought not be the one to suffer when it is your own home," she had said when he'd turned his surprised eyes upon her. "You can sleep on a cot in my room and be far more comfortable."

So Gavin had accepted, and Abigail had tried not to dwell on the intimacy of the situation that lay before them.

Thunder rumbled softly over the ocean. Abigail fought the instinct to lean outside and look up to ensure the light remained aglow. She didn't need to, what with Lieutenant Harris watching over the lamps that morning.

At least that was one thing she did not have to worry about. Although, she would not have minded taking the lieutenant's place in the watch room, thereby missing the arrival of the Kendrickses.

"Did I change the linens on their bed?" she asked, trying to ignore the swirling in her stomach.

"Yes. Do not fret. You remembered everything, I'm certain. And," he looked down at her, "you look lovely."

She knew he simply said so to ease her discomfort. She wore the same yellow gown that she had worn to Pryvly House, still unable to find the courage to wear anything else.

"I must be honest, though," Gavin continued, his eyes shining, "I was hoping you'd wear your cap today. I know how you like to make a strong first impression."

"Like I made upon you?"

He stared down at her. "I married you, did I not?"

His eyes flickered to her lips, and butterflies took flight in her stomach. They had not kissed since that first time in the sea, though Abigail had thought of the occurrence daily.

She could only guess that Gavin thought about their affection, as well. His eyes continually stared at her as they worked around the lighthouse, and he'd taken her hand in his just the other night as they strolled across the beach at sunset. But then, she could not understand why he had not kissed her again. She wondered if he regretted the affection, even though she knew he had enjoyed it as greatly as she

had.

Before she could make sense of his behavior, her attention was captured by two carriages appearing around the ridge, heading straight for the lighthouse.

"There they are," Gavin said, excitement clearly ringing in his tone.

Abigail stared at the large coaches, each drawn by four white horses. They had arranged to store the coaches in town during the length of their visit, and Abigail was glad that they had. There certainly wasn't room for them on the grounds of Golowduyn.

"Were these the coaches you had as a boy?" she asked, eying the purple velvet curtains in each of the large windows.

"Yes, I believe so," Gavin said.

She stared at the polished trim and the Kendricks coat of arms decorating the sides. She knew Gavin was well-off, but at the sight of his family's affluency—and the knowledge of his own generous living and fortune he'd earned in the navy—an overwhelming sense of inferiority came upon her, and she longed to hide away in the kitchen with the Honeysetts.

The moment the carriages stopped, three servants jumped out of the second coach, popping up umbrellas and holding them with outstretched hands as they lined the pathway toward Gavin and Abigail.

A footman opened the door to the front carriage, and a gentleman exited. He looked like Gavin, though his nose was rounder and his hair lighter. He pointed toward Gavin with a broad smile.

"Brother!" the man, no doubt Lionel, called out.

His curious eyes shifted to Abigail, before he turned to extend a hand within the carriage. Dainty, gloved fingers reached forth, and an elegant woman in dark blue traveling clothes descended the steps. Her light bonnet framed a feminine face and flawless skin.

Abigail watched in silence as Gavin stepped out into the rain, arms outstretched toward his brother. They greeted one another, slapping each other upon their backs with laughter.

"It has been far too long, Gavin."

"Though it could have been longer," Gavin quipped. "Not fit for the navy. Isn't that what you said about me?"

"Must you bring up words from our past?"

"Well, clearly my husband was wrong, *Captain* Kendricks," Gertrude said from behind them.

"That title will not hold for long, though, when my retirement become official," Gavin said, turning to his brother's wife and bestowing a small kiss on the back of her glove. "Gertrude, such a pleasure to see you again."

“And you, dear brother,” she said. “How pleased we were that you have finally chosen to retire, and with such acclaim. The whole of Gloucestershire is pleased.”

“Just as they were to have heard word of your marriage,” Lionel added.

All eyes fell upon Abigail then, who still stood in the doorway. Her back was rigid.

“Lionel, Gertrude,” Gavin said, “do follow me indoors so I may finally introduce to you my lovely wife.”

Abigail backed into the house to allow the others’ entrance. The hallway was too small for the four of them to stand comfortably, so she and Gavin led the way to the sitting room to make the introductions.

“We are so pleased to finally meet you, Mrs. Kendricks,” Lionel said after his bow.

“Indeed,” Gertrude added. “But Gavin’s correspondence with us has always been abysmal. As such, we know very little of you.”

The woman’s eyes traveled around the room as she crossed the floor, raising her skirts to a modest level and sitting upon the edge of the settee.

Abigail had done her best to improve the lighthouse—especially the sitting room—in the weeks before their arrival. A small vase of flowers rested on the bookshelf, shells of various sizes and colors were arranged near the hearth, and floral curtains framed the windows.

Even with the improvements, however, Abigail knew the sight must have been underwhelming.

“What a lovely home,” Gertrude said, though she warily eyed a crack in the corner of the ceiling.

“And positioned in such a stunning location,” Lionel added more sincerely.

Gavin nodded. “You must wait until the sun shines. The view is spectacular. My wife is particularly fond of it.”

Abigail shifted her feet, growing uncomfortable with more curious glances in her direction. She could do with a short break.

“You must be tired after such dreadful traveling conditions,” she said. “Would you care for some tea?”

“Please,” Gertrude said.

Abigail darted across the room as quickly as she could. Her unease did not bode well. If she could not bear a single moment in their presence, how was she to endure weeks with them in her home?

“Oh, Mrs. Kendricks?” Gertrude’s words stopped her. “Before I forget, would you mind very much directing our help to your servant’s entrance and quarters? I should like them to settle us in straightaway.”

Abigail froze, looking to Gavin for aid.

"We have but one entrance, I'm afraid," he explained. Gertrude's eyes bulged, though she tried to disguise it with a quick succession of blinks. "But we will be happy to show them in. Excuse us for one moment."

Abigail left the room, turning to Gavin, who followed directly behind her. "They must think we are paupers," she whispered when they were out of earshot.

"Nonsense," Gavin responded softly. "We are simply unspoiled, that is all."

"*I* am unspoiled," she retorted.

Gavin chuckled and headed toward the sopping wet servants still standing out in the rain. Abigail went to the kitchen to find Mrs. Honeysett already laying out a tray of tea.

Abigail glanced over her shoulder to see the servants filing past the doors with trunk after trunk, and her eyes widened.

"'Tis going t' be a tight fit in 'ere, ma'am," Poppy said. "With all them trunks and servants."

Abigail looked back to the girl, who had paused in scrubbing a spot on the floor.

"Yes, it is," Abigail said with a sigh. "I do not know how we are going to manage."

"With our help," Mrs. Honeysett said.

She extended the tea tray to Abigail, who accepted it with gratitude and left the room.

"Mama," Abigail heard Poppy say, "does Lieutenant Harris know they've arrived? Per'aps I ought to tell 'im."

Abigail did not hear Mrs. Honeysett's response, but she could not help but be amused at the girl's obvious excuse to be near the lieutenant.

Abigail made for the sitting room, avoiding the stares of her new family as she placed the newly purchased tray rather noisily on a small table and began to pour the tea. Gavin had returned and was standing with his brother near the fire. Gertrude still sat at the edge of her seat, as if leaning back would soil her gown.

In truth, Abigail was not sure that it wouldn't. They had not yet reupholstered the furnishings of the room.

"Your husband was just telling us you have only now employed a maid-of-all-work and a cook, Mrs. Kendricks," Gertrude said. "Is that true?"

Abigail ducked her head. "Yes, my uncle could not afford to keep much help before."

"You must find it strange to live here, brother," Lionel said, "when compared with Clowey Hall and the number of servants we

employ."

"You forget I have not lived there since I was a boy, Lionel," Gavin responded. "And being at sea helps one to realize what is necessary and what is not to live a happy life."

Abigail listened to the conversation with growing interest. She knew Gavin had often expressed his happiness with his life at Golowduyn but hearing him say as much to his brother soothed her worries further.

She handed a teacup to Gertrude—noting the woman discreetly flaring her nostrils as she sniffed at the tea—then gave one to Lionel and Gavin. Lionel watched her with an inquisitive look, though he smiled with gratitude.

The visit progressed, the brothers speaking of their memories from childhood as their wives sat by in silence. Gertrude noiselessly sipped at her tea and took the smallest bites of a biscuit that Abigail had ever seen.

"We were quite a pair, were we not?" Lionel said with a chuckle. "We must have driven our parents mad."

"Indeed," Gavin agreed.

"Most children do, I think," Gertrude added, setting her cup to rest on the plate on her lap. "Including our boys."

"How are they faring?" Gavin asked.

Lionel flashed a smile. "Growing into fine, strapping men, like their father."

Gertrude quirked a brow. "And becoming as *troublesome* as their father. At times, I do wish they were still babies. They were far easier to care for than the thirteen and fourteen-year-old boys they have grown to be." She turned to Abigail. "I am certain you are grateful that you do not have the added burden of children, Mrs. Kendricks, what with your work at the lighthouse."

Gertrude's tone was innocent, but a strange ache twisted Abigail's heart. How wrong the woman was, for Abigail greatly desired children of her own.

Still, she did not need to admit as much aloud. Not with Gavin watching her so closely. She smiled weakly at Gertrude before averting her gaze.

"Oh, but that cannot last for long." Lionel eyed his brother. "I recall you mentioning the desire to have a large family of your own one day."

Had Gavin not told his family the truth of their marriage? A blush burned her cheeks.

Gavin stared into his cup of tea. "I believe any man would wish to raise a child with the woman he loves."

Abigail's heart took flight. Raising a child, a woman he loved?

What did his words mean? Had their kiss changed Gavin's expectations in their relationship? Having a child of her own—Gavin's child—was too wonderful a thought. She needed to distract herself before his words caused her to float in the air with sheer giddiness.

Fortunately, Lionel's words brought her back to earth.

"So, Mrs. Kendricks," he began, "I must ask you, as my brother is not inclined to giving up information willingly. How did you meet one another?"

Abigail's eyes darted to Gavin. "You mean, they do not know?"

"Know?" Gertrude asked, her interest piqued for what Abigail was sure was the first time that morning. "Know what?"

"They know only of the shipwreck," Gavin said to Abigail, "nothing further."

"Of which we heard about first in the papers," Lionel said with a pointed look in Gavin's direction.

"I told you eventually," Gavin said. "I was merely busy."

Lionel scoffed before returning his attention to Abigail. "So please, my dear sister, do tell us how this all came about."

Alarm shot through her limbs. If Gavin's family did not know how he met Abigail, then that meant they were also unaware of the true reasoning behind their marriage, just as she had suspected. If Gavin wished to keep it a secret, what was she to say?

Her silence continued until thankfully, Gavin responded, coming to her rescue once again.

"It's an interesting story, our meeting," he said, his eyes bright as he told the story. "My wife, wearing a cap and jacket, rode her horse to the site of the shipwreck and lit the way to the shore for the men in the boats. Then she rowed out to sea herself, past rocks and in a storm, to save me and my lieutenant from drowning. She then proceeded to clean the sizeable wound on my arm, as well as giving aid to the other injured sailors that evening." He looked in her direction. "I was rather taken with her and have been ever since."

Abigail was grateful she was sitting down. That half-smile of his always made her knees quiver.

It was fortunate that Gertrude sat, as well, for her smooth skin had turned a sickly shade of green. Lionel, however, merely stood by in a stunned stupor.

Abigail had hoped of making a good first impression with Gavin's family, but now…that was hardly likely. Her unladylike behavior was certainly shocking to them. Still, she found it difficult to mind much, what with the way Gavin still smiled in her direction.

Lionel cleared his throat. "Well, I think you may have to go into a little more detail than that, Gavin."

"I'd be happy to," Gavin replied.

Before he could continue, however, Gertrude stood abruptly from her chair. Her voice was faint as she spoke. “I am very glad to see you safe, brother. And that your wife…rescued you. However, I fear such tales have caused a weariness to come over me. Mrs. Kendricks, would you be so kind as to show me to my room?”

Abigail nodded, standing at once to lead Gertrude from the sitting room, though she wondered if she ought to stand behind her, just in case she needed to catch the woman mid-swoon.

When Gertrude was safely situated in her room with her lady’s maid to attend to her, Abigail returned to the sitting room. She listened as Gavin recounted the story of their meeting—Abigail adding bits of information from her side of the experience—as Lionel listened, enraptured.

But Abigail hardly noticed Lionel’s response, for she was far too taken with the look of admiration in her husband’s eyes, admiration that made her heart soar.

* * *

Gertrude remained in her room the rest of the day. Her lady’s maid brought her a tray of food during dinner while Abigail listened to Gavin and Lionel update one another on the happenings in their lives.

The storm gradually faded away, and the sun began to set on the horizon. The Honeysetts and Lieutenant Harris had left a few hours before, so Abigail made for the watch room with a pail of oil in her hands.

But Gavin stopped her. “Lionel has a desire to see the lamps, so I thought I’d show him. You are welcome to join us, of course.”

Abigail declined the offer, however, wishing for the brothers to spend some time alone instead.

With dinner cleaned, the house near-spotless, Gertrude sleeping, and the brothers occupied, Abigail found herself, strangely, with nothing to do. She wandered about the house, knowing she ought to do something productive, but the warm, yellow light shining in through the window called to her.

She donned her shawl and left the house behind. Her boots squished in the moisture on the grass, the bottom of her skirts darkening with water.

She stopped at the edge of the cliff, eying the sunset before her. Dark clouds hovered low on the horizon, promising more rain that night. But the sun had broken through the cracks in the clouds for a moment and cast bright rays in every direction.

The scent of the sea and the fresh air from the storm filled her senses. The rhythmic motion and soothing sound of the waves below

lulled her fretful mind into a more peaceful state.

Having Lionel and Gertrude stay in her home for two weeks was certainly going to be exhausting. But she could manage. For Gavin, she *would* manage.

She remained there as the sun disappeared into the clouds, a muted gray shading the ocean and countryside. But she was still not ready to leave the serenity she'd found by the sea.

"I thought you would be out here."

She turned to see Gavin approaching. To her relief, he came alone.

"Seeking respite while you can, I see." He stood close to her, their shoulders grazing.

"Did your brother reach the lamp room with you?"

"Only just. His extent of exercising is using a horse to do it for him." He chuckled. "I told him you have been making the ascent since you were a child, and he was rather impressed." He paused. "It is good of you to allow them to stay. And to occupy so much of our home."

"It certainly is the least I could do after what you have done for me."

Their eyes met. "How did you find my family?"

She contemplated her answer. "They are very fine. Though, I fear I do not have much in common with either one of them."

"Nor do I."

She raised a disbelieving brow. "How can that be true? He is your brother."

"Yes, but we have different priorities."

Abigail could not deny the truth in his words. She had noticed the differences as she had listened to them. Lionel was kind, but he spoke a great deal too often about the parties they hosted and the new clothing he ordered.

She would be forever grateful she had married the brother she had.

A thought occurred, and she stared at Gavin thoughtfully. "Do you ever consider how your life might have differed had you married a lady who followed the rules of Society. One who is poised and regal, like your brother's wife?"

He seemed to contemplate her question, and instantly, she was overcome with regret. What on earth was she doing, putting such ideas into his head? Well, if he hadn't before, he would certainly desire a finer marriage now.

She could not handle hearing him say such a thing.

"Forgive me," she said. "That was a silly question. And one you certainly need not answer." She folded her arms and took a step away

from him. “Excuse me. I am feeling a little tired after today. I think I will retire. Goodnight, Gavin.”

And she scurried back to the house without awaiting his response. When she reached her room, however, noticing his belongings within —and the small cot situated near the fireplace—her heartbeat thudded hollowly within her ears.

She would not be escaping him so easily that evening.

Quickly, she changed into her night dress and hopped into bed, pulling the blankets to her chin and willing herself to fall asleep before Gavin arrived.

However, when darkness swallowed the lighthouse, and a soft knock occurred at her door, she still lay wide awake.

“Come in,” she answered softly, rolling away from the doorway.

The door creaked slowly open, and Gavin entered the room. She swallowed.

“Sorry if I woke you,” he said softly to her back.

“You didn’t,” she mumbled in her blanket.

His footsteps crossed the room, and her ears seemed to grow three times larger—and work three times better—as she listened to him remove his boots, waistcoat, and shirt. Then on went his nightshirt before he settled into his bed. The cot creaked underneath his stature.

Abigail forced her breathing to remain steady. Everything was perfectly fine. Gavin was simply in her room to avoid freezing to death overnight in the watch room. They would go to sleep, and she would not even take a second glance at him as she awoke to see to the lamps that night.

She would not think of him again. Never mind that she could hear him shifting in his cot. Never mind her desire to casually roll over toward him, just to catch a glimpse of him before she fell asleep.

“Abigail?”

Her heart leapt in her throat. “Yes?”

“You did not allow me the chance to respond to your question earlier. If I have ever thought of how my life might be, had I married another.”

Abigail froze, her back still turned toward him. She did not want to hear his answer. She closed her eyes, wincing as she awaited his words.

“The truth of the matter is,” he said, “I do, at times, imagine how my life would have differed. And each time, I am relieved that I made the choice I did. I am well aware of my great fortune in having you as my wife.”

New life beat within her. She kept her eyes closed, afraid that if she looked at him, he’d see her desire to kiss him written plainly across her feature as he continued.

“I am more than happy to be married to a woman who cannot only listen to brave tales, but take part in them, too. A woman who is selfless and courageous. A true lady.”

Abigail flinched. Her brow drew close together. Gavin had soothed her worries…until those final words.

She was no lady. And when he heard the truth, he would not think so either.

* * *

“Do you see anything you like, my dear?”

The four Kendrickses walked along the crowded roads of St. Just the following day. Stacked shops lined the thin streets and wooden signs with painted letters hung above them. They passed a stall with ribbons draped over the stands, the colorful fabric lifting in the breeze.

Gertrude shook her head silently in answer to her husband’s question before placing a hand to her temple.

“Is it still bothering you?” Lionel asked her.

“I’m afraid so.”

Abigail and Gavin exchanged glances behind them just as Lionel turned to explain.

“My wife has been suffering with a headache since last evening,” he said. “We were hoping the fresh air would alleviate the pain.”

“Sleep might have helped, as well,” Gertrude said, fingering a red ribbon with a wince, “were I able to receive any. I really do not know how the two of you manage living so close to the sea. It is so very loud.”

“I find it difficult to sleep without it now,” Gavin said.

“As do I,” Abigail agreed.

Gertrude didn’t seem to hear them. “Well, my lack of sleep caused a delirium of sorts to come about me. I thought I heard footsteps moving about the house all throughout the night. Though, I suppose that could have been the servants.”

Abigail thought the woman was teasing, but when she saw her serious expression, she looked to Gavin with a quizzical look. Had he not told his family they saw to the lamps all night?

Before she or Gavin could explain, Lionel rested a gentle hand on his wife’s shoulder. “My dear, those footsteps you heard were Gavin and Mrs. Kendricks seeing to the lighthouse.”

Gertrude looked away from a yellow ribbon. “No, Mr. Kendricks. This continued throughout the night and well into the morning.”

Her husband nodded, and her brow lowered. She turned to Gavin and Abigail. “It *was* you?”

Abigail nodded. “The lamps need to be refilled throughout the night.”

“But…” Gertrude sputtered, looking positively aghast. “But when do you ever sleep?”

“We take different shifts,” Gavin explained. “And now Lieutenant Harris—you remember him from yesterday? He helps us throughout the day when it storms.”

“My goodness.” Gertrude turned white.

Abigail wondered if the woman was going to be sick. But then, white had to be better than the shade of green her face had taken on the day before.

“*Myttin da*,” greeted an elderly man near the ribbons. He wore a frayed gray cap that did nothing but accentuate the wrinkles covering every bit of his face.

Gertrude stared blankly at the cart owner before shaking away her surprise at his foreign tongue and smiling. “Do you, perhaps, have a lovely shade of Pomona?”

The man reached for a green ribbon hanging behind the others and extended it to Gertrude.

“Excellent. Thank you, sir.” She handed him two coins and led the group forward once more. “Oh, look here.”

She motioned toward The Golden Arms Inn, where a paper was nailed near the front door. The corners of the notice flapped up and down in the breeze.

As they approached, Gertrude read the words aloud. “A public assembly. How delightfully refreshing would it be to attend a quaint, country dance after the grand balls we hold at Clowey Hall? I’m certain the both of you were already planning to attend, though.”

Her light brown eyes searched the others with excitement, but Gavin shook his head. “No, we weren’t, actually.”

Abigail studied the paper as half a plan formulated in her mind.

Two days. Help with the lamps. Public assembly. Gavin would certainly be pleased.

“Oh. Yes.” Gertrude’s face fell. “I’m afraid I have forgotten already. You must watch over the lighthouse.”

But Abigail hardly heard, still mulling over the idea. She knew Gavin would have no problem paying the subscription, nor attending at all. Of course, she did not know many of the dances—she had no reason to. But it was not unheard of for a wife to sit out an entire assembly. And since dancing with one’s spouse was hardly customary, she would not wish to partner with anyone at all anyway.

She tried to convince herself that going to an assembly without dancing would be hardly worth the effort. But then…*Gavin* was worth the effort. And she would like to show him that she had changed, that

she could attend a public gathering without leaving in an insecure and furious huff.

The memory of what had occurred during Abigail's last social outing nearly prevented her from speaking at all. The Stedmans would most certainly attend the assembly. However, the gathering would be large enough that Abigail might not even cross their paths.

Besides, Gavin knew the truth about Mrs. Stedman now. And he would defend Abigail should anything adverse occur. Of that she was sure.

"What a pity," Gertrude said. "I'm certain a bit of entertainment and country dancing would have ridden me of this headache for good."

Abigail drew a deep breath and finally spoke up. "Perhaps…" She glanced to Gavin. "Perhaps we could attend. If the weather holds, Lieutenant Harris could watch over the lighthouse for a few hours. What do you think, Captain?"

Gavin's eyes brightened, a slow smile spreading across his lips. "I think it a very fine idea."

"Oh, do you really think so?" Gertrude placed a hand to her chest. "That would be delightful. I simply adore dancing."

She spoke about her abilities with the pastime as she directed their small party farther down the street. Gavin held Abigail back as they walked slowly together.

"Are you ill?" he asked softly.

She laughed. "Why?"

"Because of what you just agreed to. Have you ever been to an assembly before?"

"No, but I always wished to." She paused. "Do you not want to go?"

"No, no, I do. Very much so."

"Good. Then I'm certain we shall enjoy ourselves."

He brought her hand up to place a lingering kiss to her fingers. "You are full of surprises, Mrs. Kendricks. What other secrets have you yet to tell me?"

His eyes danced, but Abigail nearly tripped as the words jolted sense into her. Her mind scrambled for a response, but Lionel spoke over his shoulder, saving her from needing to reply.

A blush blazed across her face. Gavin's words had struck far too close to the truth.

Secrets. Her life, her past, was inundated with secrets. Secrets that would drive a wedge between herself and Gavin, should he ever discover them.

She glanced up at him as he laughed at something his brother said. The cheerful sound and his easy smile strengthened her resolve.

She could not allow their relationship to weaken. Not when they were so happy together. Not after everything they had overcome.

She would tell him. Just as soon as she found the courage to do so.

Chapter Twelve

Two days later, Gavin paced back and forth in the sitting room. He knew he would be ready for the assembly that evening long before Lionel and Gertrude would end their primping. But as Abigail had yet to emerge from her room, as well, his anxiousness increased.

Mrs. Honeysett and Poppy had already left after helping Abigail to dress. He couldn't imagine what was still keeping her. He'd never known her to spend so much time on anything, especially fussing over her looks.

But perhaps it was his own impatience that was the issue. After all, he had been looking forward to the evening for days. He was thrilled when she'd first suggested going, and, admittedly, a little worried, if only for Abigail's sake. The Stedmans would certainly be there. Even so, he was determined to be vigilant.

And if anything was said to his wife, the Stedmans could be sure that Gavin would be there to see the matter resolved.

"Gavin?"

He stopped pacing and looked to the doorway, but Abigail did not appear. "Yes?"

"Has Lieutenant Harris arrived yet?"

He left the room and peered down the hallway, seeing her door slightly open. Only the tip of her nose was visible from within the room.

"Yes," he replied. "He is situated in the watch room, and the lamps have already been lit."

"He knows to inform us should anything out of the ordinary happen?" she asked. "Even if it is another cat?"

"Yes. He is fully prepared." Gavin struggled to regain his carefree state, setting aside his thoughts of Myles. He refused to dwell on the boy who, to his relief, had kept away from St. Just.

"Thank you," Abigail said, and she pulled back within her room.

He waited for a moment, staring at the closed door before

returning to the sitting room and resuming his pacing.

"Gavin?"

He paused again with amusement. "Yes?"

"Would you…" Her voice lowered. "Would you come here for a moment?"

"Of course." He moved down the hallway and paused just outside of the slightly-opened door. He knocked. "Abigail?"

"Yes, come in."

He entered the room. "Did you need…"

Words failed him. His feet rooted to the floor.

"Does this suit?" she asked, holding out the folds of her gown and twisting back and forth. She eyed the length, her lips twisted in displeasure.

Abigail stood tall and regal, her light green gown modestly accentuating her feminine form with delicate lace and flowing fabric. Cream slippers peeked out from her dress, and white gloves reached far up her slender arms. A golden ribbon was tied beneath her bodice and poured down her back.

Her auburn hair was twisted and curled to sit high upon the crown of her head. A few tendrils trailed down from her chignon and graced her temples, heightening the blue in her eyes and the light speckling of freckles across her cheeks and nose.

Gavin had always found Abigail attractive, but that evening? That evening, she made it difficult for him to breathe.

"I feel it is too much," she said with a scowl.

He closed the door behind him. "No, you look…perfect."

"Honestly, Gavin," she said, still eying the dress with disdain, "I need you to be serious. I fear it is too extravagant for a simple public assembly."

The fact that she was unaware of her beauty made her even more attractive. "I *am* speaking honestly, Abigail. You are beautiful."

"Are you quite certain?" she asked. She had yet to look at him. "Mrs. Follett assured me it was the latest fashion, but I cannot help but think she said so only to see more of your fortune fall into her hands."

Gavin chuckled. "That may be so. But perhaps you think it too fine because you are comparing it to your work dresses."

"Well, I would be a great deal more comfortable wearing one of those, I assure you." She huffed, scratching at the lace on her shoulder. "Oh, this color simply does not suit me. I am sure of it. No, I ought to change. I cannot arrive—"

"Abigail?"

"—appearing to be someone I am not. My hair must be a sight, as well. I told Mrs. Honeysett to not make it so very grand. Oh, I cannot

imagine why I have spent so long doing this when—"

"Abigail."

"—it is all for naught. No, I shall not be attending the dance. Please, accept my apologies. I do feel a bit of an ache in my head. Perhaps the ocean is affecting me as it does Mrs. Kendricks. Yes, that is what has happened. I shall not—"

Gavin reached forth, placing his hands on either side of her face, and staring directly into her eyes. She stopped, blinking in stunned silence.

"Abigail," he repeated softer, "you are stunning."

Her blue eyes peered up at him, humility shining in their depths. He caressed her soft cheeks with his thumbs.

He had managed to control himself for weeks now, to discover if Abigail's feelings for him had grown to love yet. He had noticed the way her eyes twinkled whenever they spoke, and the way she wistfully sighed as she stared at him. But mostly, he noticed how quickly and substantially his own willpower waned.

And now, in that moment, in her room—with her eyes framed with long, dark eyelashes and her neck long and gracefully curved as she looked up at him—he could no longer help himself. He had to kiss those pink and perfectly parted lips once more. He closed the distance between them, their lips a breath apart.

But the door next to their room opened, and his brother's voice floated toward them as he traveled down the hallway.

With a great sigh and a considerable amount of restraint, Gavin slid his fingers from her face. He allowed them to trail down her shoulders and arms before holding her hands softly in his own. "I suppose we shouldn't keep them."

His desire to kiss Abigail strengthened as he noted her own disappointment on her face. And so he vowed that before the night was over, he would kiss his wife again.

And properly.

With every jostle of the carriage, Abigail drew closer to Gavin. Their shoulders touched, and his knee pressed against hers. Her heart skipped a beat with each beguiling look he sent in her direction, each furtive glance to her mouth.

He looked strapping, as usual, in his dark jacket and polished shoes. His dark green waistcoat complimented her own gown nicely, and his cravat made his jaw appear even stronger.

And his lips…she had been so close to kissing those lips again. But now was certainly not the time to dwell on such things. Not with his family seated right across from them.

She looked to Gertrude and Lionel and was surprised to see somber expressions from both of them.

“I’m afraid we have some very unpleasant news to share with the both of you,” Lionel said.

“Yes, we do,” Gertrude agreed. She waited until all eyes were upon her before continuing. “You see, this will be our last night with you at Golowduyn.”

Abigail pulled back in surprise. Their last night? But they were supposed to stay for weeks, weren’t they? Did that mean she would have her home and Gavin all to herself again? She tried to squelch her hope. After all, they could be teasing.

“I’m sure you are both wondering why we have chosen to cut our visit so short,” Gertrude continued. “Let me first assure you that it was not of your own doing. You both have made us feel so welcome. Indeed, we shall miss your lovely lighthouse. We merely leave because the waves of the sea have become too great for me to bear.”

So she did not jest. They were, in actuality, leaving. A rush of excitement overcame Abigail. She could hardly believe her fortune.

“We truly are sorry to leave you both so soon,” Lionel added. He sent an apologetic look in his brother’s direction.

Suddenly, shame washed over Abigail. She was so focused on her own comfort that she had not even considered how Gavin might feel about the news.

She glanced up at him but was surprised to find that his expression had not changed from before. He looked perfectly content and not the least bit surprised.

“Well, we certainly do not wish you to stay if you are suffering so greatly here,” he said. “But we will miss you. Will you return to Clowey Hall now or spend the remainder of your time in London?”

“No, we are to take the waters in Bath,” Gertrude said with a pained look, though Abigail was certain she caught a glimpse of excitement in the woman’s eyes. “My cousin, Mr. Quigley, has often requested our presence at his new lodging on the Royal Crescent. I sent a letter to him only this morning. I am certain he will be most accommodating.”

She carried on about the success she had often received by taking the waters, but Abigail listened only intermittently as she stared out of the coach window.

A flock of birds flew above the trees in the distance, no doubt headed for their homes, and the summer skies quickly darkened to reveal the first twinkling stars of the night. Everything about the peaceful scene should have calmed Abigail’s nerves, but instead of sighing with relaxation, she gripped the fan she held in her hands even tighter, trying to make sense of the range of emotions spinning within her.

Gavin must be upset at no longer seeing his brother, despite his

outward, placid appearance. She was sure of it. Just as she was sure that she should not be feeling so happy about the same matter that caused him such distress.

The conflict within her grew as she considered the assembly next. She was more confident in her relationship with Gavin but still dreaded facing the Stedmans—and whoever else might think her unfit to be in attendance.

However, she, herself, had chosen to come to the assembly. No one had pressured her into it. And as Gavin's wife, she had just as much right as anyone to attend.

Yet, when they reached St. Just, her resolve threatened to dissipate. The eyes of those filing into the inn focused on the Kendricks's impressive carriage as they pulled to a stop. Their stately arrival was certainly not going to help Abigail, who had just decided to go about the evening as unnoticed as possible.

Gavin and Lionel exited first before helping their wives from the coach. Abigail ducked her head, avoiding the stares, though she could still hear the words around them.

"Such a fine coach."

"Who are they, Mama?"

"Why, is that the lighthouse keeper?"

She grasped onto Gavin's arm as he escorted her toward the line slowly filing into the inn.

"You must be pleased," he said, leaning in close.

She struggled to make sense of his words. How could she be pleased with their ostentatious entrance and the talk that had already begun to sound around them?

"About my brother leaving," he clarified.

"Oh, yes." How could she have forgotten? "I mean, no. No, I am sorry to see them go, of course, for your sake."

"Well, you needn't worry about me."

She looked up at him with her brows drawn. "Why ever not?"

Before he could explain, their turn had come to enter the inn. They passed through the large doors to the far right of the establishment. Abigail looked around her, taking in the sights.

The room's dark, wooden walls were lit by the shining chandeliers above. Flowers, arranged in arches, decorated the top of each doorway. Women spun in circles in the single dance set that lined the large hall, their finery and beaming faces flashing for all to take notice and admire.

Three musicians sat at the front of the room, playing their music as loudly as possible to be heard over the laughter, conversation, and cheering. Chairs and benches lined the edges of the room, filled to their occupancy with mothers gossiping with one another as they

watched their dancing daughters.

Abigail's stomach became a jumbled mess as she thought of being near the others and all their grandeur. She pulled out her fan and waved it beneath her chin, praying the cool air would calm her nerves.

However, when she noticed a few younger women standing nearby—daughters of local farmers and fishermen—enjoying themselves as they laughed and danced with their friends and companions, Abigail took comfort in knowing that she was not entirely out of place after all.

They entered a smaller room, adjoined with a simple archway and opened double-doors. Tables were set up with light refreshments, and the occupants gathered in small groups to speak above the sound of the lively music.

The four Kendrickses paused near the entryway. From her vantage point, Abigail could see another room beyond, filled with heavy smoke and dim lighting—the card room. She shuffled her feet to face another direction. She did not wish to see the men inside with their glassy eyes and worried brows. It reminded her too much of how her uncle might have appeared when he'd lost all of their money.

Soon, a small group gathered around them, and Gavin introduced his brother and sister-in-law to Mr. Rennalls, the Summerfields, and the Biddles.

Those in the group fairly fawned over Gertrude in all her grace and elegance. Abigail wondered if that was the reason the woman had wanted to attend the assembly in the first place.

Abigail could not blame her, nor was she unhappy with the attention Gertrude did receive. For any attention that was on Gertrude, was attention that was off of Abigail. And that was certainly something to be happy about.

As the conversation centered around the Kendricks' home in Gloucestershire, music from the hall drifted toward Abigail's ears. She looked over her shoulder to observe the twirling young women in their fine dresses again. But her eyes instantly fell upon the Stedmans, and her stomach turned as quickly as the dancers.

Mrs. Stedman was speaking to Mrs. Rennalls. No doubt the both of them were engaged in some manner of gossip, as evident by their wide eyes and open mouths.

Miss Stedman stood behind them, apparently unaware of her mother's tantalizing chatter, as she stared, unsurprisingly, in Gavin's direction.

Abigail's lips pulled into a deep frown. Had the girl no decency? Yes, Mrs. Stedman encouraged her daughter's behavior, but that in no way excused Miss Stedman's own shameful actions. And Abigail had a

mind to do something about it.

However, as Miss Stedman—who had yet to become aware of Abigail watching her—continued to stare at Gavin, sadness flitted in her eyes, and a look of sorrow flashed on her brow.

Abigail paused. What had the girl to be sad about? The fact that Gavin was already married, or that she knew she erred in wanting to lead him astray?

Before Abigail could decipher the young woman's thoughts, her view was broken by the couples dancing down the set. By the time they skipped past, Miss Stedman had disappeared.

The lilting sound of Gertrude's laughter brought Abigail's attention back to the group. She faced forward to see the woman's lively eyes as she shared one story after another, the group completely captivated.

"Her headache certainly seems to have dissipated," Gavin said, leaning down toward Abigail and whispering in her ear.

His breath fluttered the soft curls near her neck, sending chills along her arms. Thank goodness the gloves covered most of them.

"Yes, she seems much recovered," Abigail returned. "If she even had a headache to begin with."

Gavin chuckled. The deep, rich sound was music to her ears.

Abigail glanced to Lionel, who watched his wife with clear admiration in his eyes. They certainly did love each other. She thought again of their impending departure and recalled Gavin's apathetic words from earlier.

"Are you truly not upset with their leaving, Gavin?" she asked quietly.

He leaned toward her again. "Of course, I will be sorry to see them go, but I am as ready as you are to have our home to ourselves again."

Abigail's spirits soared. She still needed to take care, but knowing Gavin was not utterly distraught eased her guilty conscience.

"I certainly took for granted being able to walk through the circular room without stepping on a footman's hand," Gavin continued, "or head."

Abigail's eyes widened. "Did that truly happen?"

"I cannot say for certain, but I did see a strange, boot-shaped mark on the footman's brow this morning."

They snickered together at the image his words had produced.

"Captain?"

They stifled their laughter and turned to Mr. Rennalls, who had spoken to Gavin.

Abigail was surprised to discover that the group around them had dwindled. Gertrude stood off to the side, in conversation with the

Summerfields, and all who remained next to Gavin and Abigail were Mr. Rennalls and Lionel.

"Care to try your luck at a bit of cards?" Mr. Rennalls asked.

The gentlemen looked to the card room.

"Thank you," Gavin responded, "but not this evening."

Abigail knew Gavin refused the offer to be considerate of her own feelings. He must remember her uncle's foolishness as much as she did. Though she appreciated the sentiment, she had no right to control his life. If he wished to play, then he should be allowed to.

Besides, she knew most men enjoyed gaming, but not all of them became obsessive as her uncle had.

"I will be all right if you go," she said softly, motioning to the room.

"No, I'd rather not."

"Come now, sir," Mr. Rennalls pressed. "Surely you aren't afraid of losing to a physician?"

Gavin merely smiled in response.

"I must warn you, sir," Lionel said, "you waste your time with my brother. He has never been one to play at cards."

Mr. Rennalls narrowed his eyes. "Is that true, Captain?"

"I never saw the appeal of risking something I'd worked hard for," Gavin replied.

Lionel and Mr. Rennalls struck up a conversation of their own, but Abigail stared up at Gavin. He had never liked to game? She could hardly believe it. Every gentleman she had ever known—including her own uncle and father—enjoyed gaming. And yet, Gavin did not.

Just one more reason to add to her ever-growing list of why she was so grateful he was her husband.

A smooth voice spoke up behind her and shrouded her joy in a dark, thick cloud. "For one who does not like taking risks, he certainly took one on his wife."

Gavin's muscles tensed beneath her hand. Abigail eyed his furrowed brow, the rage sparking in his eyes, and she knew at once that he'd heard Mrs. Stedman's words as clearly as she had.

He made to turn, and Abigail knew what he intended. Her heart soared. How many years had she longed to be protected in such a way—to be taken care of, defended? She could only imagine the things he would say. Mrs. Stedman was sure to never bother with them again. And Miss Stedman would finally cease her flirtatious stares. Finally, Abigail had the help she needed. Finally, she would be safe.

Yet, as Gavin moved, she reached out her hand to prevent him. He shot her a puzzled look, but she gave a subtle shake of her head and looked over her shoulder herself.

The Stedmans stood a mere arm's length away. Abigail noticed

Miss Stedman first, staring at her mother with a crinkled brow. The young woman sent a fleeting, guilt-ridden glance in Abigail's direction before leaving her mother's side and disappearing from the room.

Mrs. Stedman watched her daughter depart before facing Abigail with innocent eyes.

Now was Abigail's chance. Gavin had heard the snake's tongue, but she had prevented him from speaking. Because this was her fight. And knowing she had Gavin's support gave her the courage she needed to go on.

She opened her mouth, ready to release years of pent-up frustrations over the woman's behavior. Abigail would tell her what she truly thought of her, how Uncle Ellis would have never married a woman so despicable. And she would finally have the revenge she deserved.

She made to release her hold of Gavin's arm before she realized… she was holding *Gavin's* arm. What did it matter what Mrs. Stedman said? Abigail knew there was nothing she could say to change the woman's opinion of her. Mrs. Stedman could very well remain bitter until the day she died, merely because Uncle Ellis did not choose her.

She paused. Uncle Ellis had not chosen Mrs. Stedman, and it had caused the woman misery for years. And Uncle Ellis…he had not chosen Abigail either.

She knew all too well the pain of rejection, of not feeling good enough for someone she loved. But she could not allow her own hurt and betrayal to make her caustic and cruel, like it had Mrs. Stedman.

Abigail needed to forgive. She needed to allow herself to heal from Mrs. Stedman's actions, and her uncle's. For she had something else—*someone* else—to live for.

She looked up at Gavin, his brown eyes still studying her, and she squared her shoulders. She would no longer be controlled by another's darkness. She would choose light. And she would choose Gavin.

With a fleeting look in Mrs. Stedman's direction, she turned away. "She is not worth any more of my time," she whispered.

And the heavy burden upon her shoulders began to lighten at the pleased look Gavin shared with her.

The rest of the evening passed by swiftly. The Stedmans kept very much away from them both, though Abigail saw Miss Stedman's focus occasionally dart away from her as she danced down the set.

Gertrude remained the center of attention for most of the night. Many gentlemen vied for her hand, but she eventually chose to sit out the dances, as well, her headache having returned.

Abigail had found herself enjoying the excitement around her, partaking in laughter and good-natured conversation, but as midnight arrived, she was quite relieved to wait for their coach as it pulled up

in front of the inn.

Gavin offered his hand to help her into the carriage, but as she reached for her skirts, she noticed the absence of her fan.

"I believe I left it near the refreshment table," she said with an apologetic look. "I can retrieve it quickly."

"No, allow me to fetch it for you," Gavin said, helping her into the coach with a soft squeeze to her fingers. "I'll be but a moment."

And as Abigail peered out of the coach's window, watching Gavin walk away with his broad shoulders and powerful stride she wondered what she had done to deserve such a man in her life.

Gavin eyed the refreshment table, spotting Abigail's fan in an instant. He weaved through the people still drinking and chatting away before retrieving it and turning on his heel, intent on returning to the carriage as quickly as possible.

However, as he turned, he came face-to-face with Mrs. Stedman, who smiled up at him with a look of innocence. He clutched Abigail's fan in his fist.

How Mrs. Stedman even dared to look at him was beyond him. He had clearly heard her words about his wife. Did she think for one moment he would pretend it did not happen?

"Captain," she said, "so you did not leave after all. Have you returned to dance with my lovely daughter?"

He cringed to think of how daft he had been before, to have completely missed her true intentions concerning her daughter and himself. Well, he would not be so foolish now.

"She is a true lady, my daughter," Mrs. Stedman continued. "Some women may attempt to match her by changing gowns and hairstyles, but no amount of primping can compare to her natural beauty. It is no wonder you admire her."

His gaze turned sharply to the woman. Anger caused his breath to catch. Abigail may have been noble enough to have turned the other cheek, but he could no longer allow Mrs. Stedman's shameful behavior to continue.

He faced her squarely and spoke in a firm tone. "You are mistaken, ma'am, if you think I could ever admire your daughter above my own wife. That is not, and never shall, be the truth."

Mrs. Stedman's eyes rounded, her face aflame as he pressed on.

"Furthermore, I must clarify that I shall never grow weary of her. Nor shall I seek companionship with anyone *other* than her. Ever."

Her eyes darted around her, as if to ensure no one else heard their words. "Of course, sir. I would never dream of suggesting otherwise."

"I should hope not." He stared at her pointedly. "Now, if you will excuse me. My wife is waiting for me."

"Yes, yes, of course."

She was gone before Gavin moved a single step. Satisfaction overcame him to have seen her flustered state. Finally, they were to be rid of the woman.

He drew in a deep, calming breath then moved past smiling couples and stifled yawns, anxious to be once again at his wife's side.

When they reached the lighthouse, Gertrude went straight to bed while Gavin and Lionel convened in the sitting room. Abigail rang the large bell in the circular room—apologizing for the servants she'd awoken and waited for Lieutenant Harris to descend the stairs.

"Did you have an enjoyable evening, ma'am?" he asked as he reached her side.

She thought back to her releasing Mrs. Stedman's hold over her, to Gavin's attentiveness throughout the night, and her cheeks glowed. "Very enjoyable, thank you. How fares Golowduyn?"

"It is well, ma'am. Everything is in order. No cats in the henhouse. No destruction to the lighthouse."

She released a sigh. "Perhaps the boy has moved on, then," she said.

"I wouldn't doubt it, ma'am."

When Lieutenant Harris had left, Abigail brought in a tray of tea for Gavin and Lionel, then excused herself to retire, as well.

After managing to unfasten the buttons of her gown and wiggle her way out of the rest of it, Abigail donned her nightdress and slipped into bed. But the moment her head hit the pillow, she recalled the oil hutch.

Lieutenant Harris would have remembered to secure the lock after refilling the lamps, she was sure. And yet, the thought refused to pass.

With a groan, she threw back her covers and left her room. When she heard voices coming from the sitting room, however, she paused, staring down at her nightdress. She could hardly walk by the gentlemen wearing so little, no matter how quickly she darted past the doorway.

She stifled a sigh and made to return to her room, but when she heard her name spoken in Gavin's deep voice, she held her breath and leaned close to the doorway to better hear the brothers' words.

Chapter Thirteen

"Truthfully, you lasted longer at Golowduyn than I anticipated," Gavin said, smiling at Lionel as he sat across from him in the sitting room. "Though, Abigail believed you would remain the full two weeks."

"Well, at least I have the confidence of your wife," Lionel said with a laugh. "I was fully intending on remaining, I assure you. We truly are leaving due to Gertrude's headache, but we *were* taken aback by the size of the lighthouse."

"Surely not. I explained very clearly what space was available."

Lionel waved his hand. "Yes, yes, I know. I told Gertrude what to expect, but change is difficult for her."

"And for you." Gavin quirked a brow and leaned back in his chair, lacing his hands together at his waist. "As short as your visit was, though, I am glad you could be here to meet Abigail."

At the thought of his wife, Gavin recalled the evening he'd shared with her. He had wanted to kiss her while she wore that dress. He had wanted to express his love to her. But he had quickly realized that doing so in a more intimate location—not a teeming assembly—would be far better for them both.

After all, they were already married. Why could they *not* speak with more privacy, somewhere without interruption? He wished to do so somewhere that he could finally kiss her, reveal his feelings for her. And pray that she might now feel the same.

"I wish I could have come to your wedding."

Lionel's words ended Gavin's thoughts. He looked to his brother's unreadable expression. "I wished for you to attend, as well. But you understand, time did not permit."

Lionel opened and closed his mouth before sighing. "Gavin, forgive me. You seem very happy with your wife, but I must ask…did you marry her for love?"

Gavin propped his elbow on the armrest of the chair, resting his

head against it with a finger to his temple. He knew the question would come at some point during their visit. He had rehearsed his answer, as well, to avoid any judgment his family might cast upon Abigail. But at Lionel's deciphering eyes, Gavin knew he could not get away with a lie.

Biting his lower lip, he shook his head. "That is not what spurred the marriage on in the beginning, no."

Lionel's shoulders fell, and he tilted his head to the side with disappointment. "Then why on earth did you do it, Gavin? You have only now submitted your request to retire. You had your whole life before you, and certainly your choice of women. I mean no disrespect to your lovely wife, of course. She is attractive and amiable. But…did you have no desire to marry for love at all?"

"Of course I did," Gavin responded. "I long for love in a marriage as much as any man."

"Then why did you do it?"

Gavin leaned forward, gathering his thoughts before proceeding. "When Abigail's uncle passed away, he left behind a considerable debt, one that would force her from Golowduyn. I offered my hand in marriage so I could pay the debt and allow her to stay at her home."

Lionel stared, dumbfounded. "You gave up your future, your prospects, your home in Gloucestershire, to live out the remainder of your days in a *lighthouse* with a woman you did not know long enough to even trust?"

"Of course not," Gavin nearly growled. "I forfeited a barren life and an uncertain future for a home in a place I love, near the sea I love—with a woman more than deserving of a secure and happy life."

"But what of your own happiness?"

"You have seen for yourself that I am happy here."

Lionel looked away. "Very well, but will it last? How could you ever be certain when you behaved so rashly?"

Gavin stared into the fire with a shake of his head. "I do not behave rashly, Lionel. I rely upon my instinct. An instinct that I believe is God-given. I felt it when joining the navy, which I have never once regretted, and it helped me survive countless storms and battles at sea. My decision to retire was made in the same regard." He paused with a sigh. "I was lost at sea. Not physically, but…mentally. I knew not what my future held, nor what I wished to do with the rest of my life."

He looked then to his brother. "But when I saw Golowduyn shining above me, when Abigail pulled me from the sea, I felt a pull to *her*, as if I finally knew where to go. And I am certain you may venture a guess as to what other decision I have made based on my instinct."

A small smile curved across Lionel's lips. "Marrying Abigail?"

"Marrying Abigail," Gavin repeated. "After she rescued me, I could not keep away. I saw her love for Cornwall, for Golowduyn. I soon grew to love the same things, and I knew I could not live with myself if I did not help her. And now I realize that I could not live a happy life without her by my side."

Abigail blinked back her tears as she tiptoed back to her room. Lying in her bed, the oil hutch completely forgotten, she stared at the ceiling with a full heart.

Being at the assembly that evening had made her feel free. Living near the sea, safely beneath Golowduyn's light, made her feel alive. And Gavin…Gavin made her feel loved.

With her worrying and wonderings set aside, she could finally admit the words to herself. She loved the captain, with a love that ran deep. A love that filled every part of her body and her soul.

And how she longed to share it with him.

Before long, she heard him coming down the hallway. She closed her eyes as the door opened and shut. His shoes softly slid across the wooden floor as he walked toward his cot.

In the dim light of the dying fire, she peered at him through her eyelashes. Her heart fluttered when she saw his eyes upon her. He removed his cravat and jacket, dropping them onto his dresser before turning around to remove his shirt.

She eyed the purple scar on his upper left arm. So much had occurred since that fateful shipwreck two months before, she could hardly believe it.

He sat on his bed with a sigh, rubbing his hands on his face with a tired look. He eyed the dresser, and Abigail wondered if he contemplated pulling on his nightdress. Eventually, he lay back, stretching out on the cot with hands resting behind his head.

She watched him for a moment, just as she had the past few nights they had shared a room. After that first night together, she had been too nervous to do anything but feign sleep.

Soon, his chest rose and fell with slow breaths, and she observed him for only a moment before her own eyelids drifted to a close.

Not a moment later, she woke up to a loud crack of breaking wood. She sat upright, her heart pounding.

Myles, she knew it was him. But what had he done this time? She scanned the length of the room before narrowing her eyes toward Gavin, who sat in a pile of bedding—his cot crumpled to pieces beneath him.

"What happened?" she whispered.

He ran his fingers through his hair, his voice groggy. "The cot gave way."

“Are you all right?” she asked, leaning forward.

Gavin grunted as he stood, staring at the mess on the floor. “Well, I am in a better shape than my cot.”

With her previous exhaustion gone, Abigail pulled the blanket up to her mouth to hide her amusement. She bit her lip but was unable to stop her shoulders from shaking as she laughed silently at the sight.

Gavin glanced toward her, his eyebrows raised accusatorily. “Oh, this is humorous to you, is it?”

“No,” came her muffled response as she pressed the fabric against her mouth harder. A giggle escaped her lips. She eyed his tall stature and broad physique and wondered how the cot had not broken until that night.

She drew in a deep breath, speaking when she’d regained control. “Are you certain you are well?”

“Yes, I believe I’ll live.” He slid a few of the broken pieces off to the side. “Where are the extra cots?”

“Underneath the Kendricks’s servants, I’m afraid.”

“Of course they are,” he muttered. “The floor it shall be then.”

He laid out his blanket upon the hard wood with his pillow on the top.

“You cannot sleep down there, Gavin,” she said. “You will be far too uncomfortable. Not to mention cold.”

“I shall manage.”

He sat down upon the blankets, and she leaned over the side of her bed to better see him. “Why do I not sleep there, and you take my bed? Tonight is your shift for the lamps, so it is only fair you sleep soundly for a few hours at least.”

He glanced at her sidelong. “I think not.”

He lay down, shifting his weight and settling upon the floor. He repeated the motion two more times before sitting upright with an exasperated sigh. “I am going to sleep in the watch room.”

He picked up his blankets and pillow, but Abigail shook her head.

“Gavin, you know it is too cold to sleep comfortably at all up there. Besides, the cot in the watch room is less sturdy than the one you have just flattened down here.”

She bit her lip to keep her laughter at bay.

“Very well, then I shall sleep on the settee in the sitting room.”

“I have it on good authority,” she said, his hand pausing on the door handle, “that one of the servants has taken to sleeping on the very same settee while the rest of the household has gone to bed. In case you have not noticed him sleeping there before.” She paused. “Perhaps he has broken his own cot.”

He scowled at the laughter she could no longer stifle. “Well, I am out of options then. Perhaps I should sleep in the stables, though I

assume you take issue with that suggestion, as well?"

"Of course, I do."

"Then what am I to do?"

She looked down at her own bed. "Why do you not sleep here for the night?"

"I have already said I will not sleep in your bed while you sleep on the…" His brow raised in surprise. "Oh. You would be all right with that?"

Embarrassment flushed through her. What had she just suggested? Of course it was the only logical solution, and her bed was more than large enough for the both of them—but what would he think with her being so forward?

And how was she to even sleep a moment with Gavin so near her?

"It will only be for tonight," she said, attempting to appear nonchalant, despite her burning cheeks. "And I only offer because I need your help with the lighthouse. Otherwise, your freezing overnight would not matter."

She wondered if he caught her teasing as he peered over at her with his dark eyes. "I would not wish to impose."

She shuffled over to the far side of the bed, patting the empty spot next to her. "The only imposition would be if you kept me awake any longer with your indecisiveness. Come along."

He dropped his blankets on floor and walked toward her with his pillow. "Very well. If you are certain."

"I am."

She lay back on her pillow, tucking her nightdress modestly beneath her, as he lifted the blankets. Cold air slid across her body until he settled down.

The bed creaked.

"May I ask a favor of you?" She stared up at the ceiling, though she could see him watching her from his back.

"Of course."

"Please try not to break my bed, as well."

Silence met her until Gavin's chuckles sounded about the room with her own. When their laughter subsided, the tension between them eased.

"Thank you, Abigail," Gavin said. "I am far more comfortable here than I would have been on the floor."

"Well, I could not, in good conscience, allow you to sleep anywhere else."

Gavin's eyes focused on her. "You must be careful, Mrs. Kendricks. If you say such things, I may begin to think that you have grown fond of me."

She turned to face him, and suddenly, her lungs refused to work. She and Gavin were close. *Too* close. She could see every bit of his face, despite the dim light. His strong jaw, dark hair, his bare chest partially covered by the blankets—*her* blankets. What had she done, inviting him into her bed? It was far too intimate…and far too tempting.

Her eyes drew to his lips. "Do not flatter yourself, sir. I haven't grown fond of you."

Of course, she only said such a thing to quell her racing heart. Unfortunately, it did not work.

"Deny it all you like, my darling," Gavin said as he nestled further in his pillow. "You *have* grown fond of me."

The endearment made her head spin. And when Gavin found her hand next to his above the blanket, he threaded his fingers between hers.

Her skin tingled at his touch, her heart flying as high as the gulls over the sea. How she loved this man lying beside her. How she wished to be honest with him, to tell him the truth about her past. Surely he would listen and understand. Just as he always did.

Of course, now was not the time.

Now, she was going to enjoy the presence of her husband lying next to her, the feel of his hand holding hers.

Still struggling to draw in a deep breath, Abigail returned his grasp and tightened her own.

He stroked his thumb against her skin. "Goodnight, Abigail," he whispered.

"Goodnight, Gavin."

With his caress on her hand, and the sound of his deep, steady breathing beside her, Abigail's eyes drifted to a close.

And her fingers remained intertwined with his until long after they had both fallen fast asleep.

* * *

The next day, the Kendrickses and their servants departed from Golowduyn. Gertrude had dabbed at tears that were not present, and Lionel had observed Abigail with curious eyes.

They left with the promise to return one day, but as their coaches pulled away from the lighthouse, Gavin had exchanged a dubious look with Abigail.

With their house empty once again, Gavin intended on celebrating with his wife. Using the excuse of purchasing more feed for the horses and hens, he'd left for town—while Abigail remained behind to light the lamps for the approaching storm on the horizon.

He rode through St. Just swiftly, hoping to return home before

the rain set in, longing to be reunited with Abigail sooner.

The night before, he'd had to practice incredible restraint by simply holding Abigail's hand as they lay together. She had been so close, so tempting with her auburn hair sprawled out across her pillow, her pink lips ever so inviting.

He would miss Lionel and Gertrude at Golowduyn, but he would miss sharing a bed with his wife more. Though, he hoped that would not be the same forever.

After picking up his orders, he returned to his horse. He opened the small box, peering inside to see the ring—a gold band lined with five stacked turquoise gems—that he'd had made for Abigail weeks before. He'd wanted to give her a ring on the day of their wedding but decided to have something special made when they had more time.

He tucked it securely within the box before sliding it into his saddlebag.

As he glanced over his horse, his eyes fell upon Mrs. Rennalls walking down the street in his direction. She was deep in conversation with Mrs. Maddern, a middle-aged woman in their parish. By the looks on their faces, they appeared to be sharing some sordid manner of gossip—probably learned from last night's assembly—and Gavin did not wish to become involved.

He wanted to return to Abigail.

Without another thought, he ducked low, feigning to examine his horse's back leg as the women passed by.

"We should not be surprised," he heard Mrs. Maddern say, "what with the behavior of her uncle."

"Indeed," Mrs. Rennalls said. "But still, it is all rather disturbing. I do not know how Mrs. Kendricks can ever leave Golowduyn, knowing the truth about her past."

A warning flared in Gavin's mind. Everything within him told him to stop listening, to get away from the women's gossip as quickly as possible. But he froze.

"Are you certain it is even true?"

"Oh, yes, Mrs. Stedman has confirmed it herself," Mrs. Rennalls said. "And it is easy enough to believe. Mrs. Abigail Kendricks is, quite assuredly, the daughter of a drunken gentleman and his scullery maid."

Shock pulsed through Gavin's body. He could hardly breathe.

The women continued down the street, neither of them appearing aware that they had been overheard.

But their words spun around in Gavin's mind. He had suspected that Abigail's parents were the source of her reticence regarding her past, but he had never allowed himself to speculate for long. After all, he had thought Abigail would trust him enough to share more by now.

So why had she not?

He felt like he was walking through a fog, his legs heavy as he heaved himself onto his horse.

"Captain?"

He shook his head. He could not speak. He needed to get to Golowduyn, to Abigail. He needed to speak with her.

But the voice called again. "Captain Kendricks?"

Harris? He recognized his voice now. Gavin turned his attention to the approaching lieutenant. "What is it?"

"Captain, I needed to…Are you well?"

"Yes, but I need to return to Golowduyn."

"Of course," Harris said, though his eyes were wary. "I will not take up much of your time. I simply thought you should know, Myles Sanders was seen here again last evening. In the tavern."

Gavin tried to focus. Myles had returned? He groaned.

"Sir? Are you certain you are well?"

"Yes. Thank you for telling me. Please, keep an eye on him as best you can. I…I need to get back to the lighthouse."

Gavin did not wait for a response, merely led his horse forward, moving the quickest way through town, though his movements hardly registered as he thought of Abigail.

He recalled the moment long ago when she had finally agreed to their marriage. She had been about to tell him something—this certainly must have been it.

He had pressed her not to speak until she was ready to do so, and he still stood by that decision. He did not want to pressure her, to force her to tell him anything out of guilt.

He had wanted Abigail to tell him because she *wanted* to. Because she trusted him—because she loved him.

And the knowledge that she didn't was what caused the ache in his heart the most.

Abigail hummed a simple tune as she arranged a few wildflowers in a vase. Having gathered them just as the rain began, droplets still clung to the yellow petals. The vibrancy they brought into the room outshone even the dark clouds outside.

After lighting the lamps, and with the Honeysetts having the day off—deciding it only fair after their hard work during the Kendricks's visit—Abigail had taken it upon herself to make a quick meal for her and Gavin to enjoy when he returned. The smell of warm bread wafted through the house as it cooled on the table.

She glanced up from the flowers as a movement across the window caught her eye. Gavin was leading his horse into the stables.

Quickly, she went about gathering the final touches of the meal—butter, marmalade, and a bowl of fruit. She finished, waiting at the

window until she saw him emerge from the stable, his top hat low as he ducked his head in the rain.

The door opened, and she waited for his familiar greeting as she twisted the vase to look better at a different angle.

Silence met her.

"Gavin? I hope you did not get too wet in the rain. The storm certainly came in quickly."

There was a pause. "Yes, it did."

She left the dining room in search of him. "I made bread, if you are hungry."

She found him in the sitting room, standing at the window with his back turned toward her. His jacket hung over a chair, dripping onto the floor. The shoulders of his waistcoat were wet.

"Are you all right?"

He nodded. But then, why did he not turn to face her? And why did he not speak?

"Did something happen while you were in town? More word of Myles, perhaps?"

Thunder sounded, a low, prolonged rumbling, and Gavin turned toward her. When his eyes fell upon her, her heart sank.

"Gavin?" Her voice was hardly above a whisper.

"Why, Abigail?"

She fidgeted with her fingers. "What do you mean?"

"Why did you not tell me?"

Her chin trembled. She could not play the fool, nor could she allow Gavin to feel like one. "I tried. Before our marriage. I tried to tell you. But you said I did not have to. Not until I was ready."

"I know," he said. "And I meant it. Before we were married, you would have told me the truth out of obligation. So why, after all our time together, did you not tell me sooner?"

"I was afraid, Gavin. And I only grew more afraid as time passed because…" The pain in his eyes pierced her soul, and her breath caught in her throat. "I'm sorry, Gavin," she whispered, and she fled from the house.

"Abigail, wait!"

But she couldn't. She slammed the door behind her, raising her skirts to her knees and running freely across the grass on the cliffside. Rain and tears streamed down her face. Why had she not told Gavin the truth sooner? Why did she not take courage and speak the words the moment he'd offered his hand in marriage, like she'd intended?

But the truth had become more difficult to say the closer they had drawn to each other. And now, she was too late.

She slid down to the beach, her pace slowing as soon as she reached the water. Waves crashed onto the shore in gray and white

droves. The wind sprayed the mist high into the air at each waves' crest.

The sound of the water rushing toward her enveloped her senses. But it did not dull the ache in her heart.

She tried to convince herself that she was strong and independent. That she could move on from this alone. But the words were feeble attempts to mollify her fears. Would Gavin leave her now that he knew the truth? He certainly had every right to.

She was dishonest. She was an illegitimate child. And she was unworthy of being married to a captain of the navy—to a gentleman as good as Gavin.

As she caught sight of Golowduyn glowing above, a numbness crept over her. The structure stood strong in the storm. Tall grass thrashed back and forth against it, and rain assailed the windows. Yet still, its light shone, warning captains of the danger that awaited them should they stray too close to the shore.

Why had Gavin not followed the warning? If only he had stayed away, he could have saved himself from the misery and heartache she had caused him. He could have married a woman worthy of his love, not one who had used his wealth and good nature to her advantage.

A great wave slammed into the sand before her, water reaching her boots and lifting her skirts to her calves, but she remained where she was. After all, what did it matter if her boots and dress were ruined by the salty sea? What did it matter if her feet numbed from the cold?

The lighthouse, her home, her way of life and source of income—none of it mattered without Gavin. None of it mattered *but* Gavin. She should have put him before all else instead of focusing so greatly on her own fears—of losing the lighthouse, of Mrs. Stedman's words, and of her past being revealed. She had allowed herself to become careless in her regard of him.

And she bitterly regretted her selfishness.

"Abigail?"

She started, willing her breathing to remain steady at Gavin's call. He was not supposed to follow her. He was supposed to leave her.

She remained motionless. Her hands hanging limply at her sides.

His boots splashed through the water as he moved toward her. "Abigail, what are you doing?"

She clenched her teeth together to prevent her chin from trembling. He reached out to her, but she stepped away from his grasp, eying him sidelong.

"Don't, Gavin. I do not deserve…" Her voice broke. "I was deceitful. You are a gentleman. You deserved better."

"Abigail, if you think this changes our marriage—"

“How can it not?” she asked, finally facing him. Rain slid down his face, his clothing already soaked through with water. “I am the product of a loveless tryst. My mother, a scullery maid. My father, a philanderer. I do not deserve happiness with you.”

“Ask me, Abigail, if I feel such a way.”

She turned away, but he stood in front of her, forcing her to look at him. “Ask me.”

“I cannot.”

“Why? Why do you fear telling me about your past?”

She drew in a shaking breath, staring at the sand as it swirled around the water in which they stood. “Because I could not bear your disappointment…nor could I bear the thought of you leaving.”

Gavin took a step toward her. She ducked her head, but he reached out, cradling her face in his hands and urging her to meet his eyes.

“Have I not proven my devotion to you, Abigail?” he asked, wiping her tears with his thumbs. “I could never leave you. I *will* never leave you.”

Abigail stared into his deep brown eyes, and finally, she believed him.

He wrapped his arms around her, and she clung to the back of his shirt, silently crying against his chest.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered as he held her securely amidst the storm. “I’m sorry for everything.”

When her cries softened, Gavin helped Abigail return to the lighthouse. His heart had broken as she revealed her true fears to him, and he was determined even more to prove his dedication to the woman he loved.

After changing into dry clothes and ensuring the light still glowed above, they sat down together in the sitting room. The storm still raged outside. The sun hidden behind the clouds caused the room to darken, though the fire cast a warm glow around them. They huddled near one another on the settee, a thick blanket across their laps. Gavin held Abigail’s cold hands, feeling them tremble in his grasp as she began her story.

“In truth, I am surprised my secret has been kept from you for this long,” she said, her blue eyes darkened with shame. “I am not certain, but I believe there are a few individuals around St. Just who are aware of my past. Most of them have kept the information to themselves. But I’m sure I may safely assume you heard word of it from Mrs. Stedman.”

“In a way,” Gavin said. He recounted what he had heard from Mrs. Rennalls, and Abigail’s shoulders sunk further.

“I should like to tell you the full truth now so this secrecy between us may come to an end.” She drew a deep breath. “My father was Mr. Norman Moore of Grinston Hall in Staffordshire. When he was eighteen years old, his father died, leaving him in control of the estate. As master of the house, he was not discouraged when he took interest in the young, lower maids of the house. He did as he wished with them and removed those who protested or spoke of his behavior.

“He met my mother, a scullery maid for his estate, when she was fifteen. And he pursued her. But when she discovered she was with child, *his* child, he sent her away. She had nowhere to turn. No family, no friends. So she took refuge and found work in a…a house of ill repute. And it was there, I was born.”

She winced, a crease forming between her eyebrows. “Only a few women knew of my existence. I was kept there secretly for five years until my mother could no longer afford to keep me. That, or she no longer *wished* to keep me. She woke me early one morning for a promised walk in the sunshine. I was thrilled to be out of doors, even for the hours-long journey we took. She brought me to the servants’ entrance of a stately home I had never seen. She handed me a letter addressed to the lady of the house and left me with a kiss to my brow, promising to return when she could better keep me. I watched her walk away for the last time that day. As I would discover later, she was killed by a man she…”

Her eyes dropped, and Gavin nodded his understanding. He struggled to come to terms with her words, imagining all too well the sight of a young Abigail, alone and abandoned.

“After she left, I was brought into Grinston Hall before the mistress, Mrs. Moore. She called for her son, my father, though I was not aware of who they were at the time. I saw his eyes focus on my hair—the same shade as my mother’s—and with an emptiness in his eyes, he left the room without a glance back.

“In what I suppose was an effort to avoid a scandal, or perhaps as some evidence of guilt, my grandmother, knowing of her son’s rampant debauchery, sent me to the boarding school in Cheshire. I was far enough away to have no connection with her, beyond the monthly payment she sent for me to continue living there.”

Her lip slanted down. “I preferred my other living to the boarding school. I did my best to be obedient. But I discovered that nothing stopped the scolding and beatings from teachers and students alike. I was there to be punished. Not for my own choices, but for my parents’.”

Understanding and compassion swirled in Gavin’s mind. Words Abigail had said to him before, things she had done, all of it made sense now in the revelation of her history. It was no wonder she

feared he would leave her. Everyone else in her life had. No one, especially a little girl, especially his Abigail, should have to have suffered in such a way.

"After four years," she continued, "I was told that Mrs. Moore had died. My time at the school was to be terminated. I would be sent to the local parish before being assigned to hard labor elsewhere. The day I was set to leave, I sat on a large chair outside of the schoolmaster's office, waiting to meet my new master. The door opened, and I was met instead by a man with blue eyes."

When she paused, he spoke. "Your uncle."

"Yes. He dropped to his knees and wrapped his arms around me. 'I am your Uncle Ellis,' he said, 'I am going to take you away from here and bring you to a new home.' He promised to never leave me, like everyone else had in my life. I did not trust him, of course, and pushed out of his embrace. But after he berated the schoolmaster for my treatment, and then proceeded to fill me with many pies and pastries, I became less wary of him."

A hint of a smile touched her lips.

"Did he bring you directly to Cornwall?" Gavin asked.

"Yes, and I was allowed for the first time in my life to explore the world around me." Her eyes took on a faraway look. "Instead of carriages on cobblestones, I heard the roar of the sea's waves and herring gulls calling overhead. Instead of the black, iron fence that confined me at the boarding house, I was surrounded by rugged cliffsides and pink wildflowers. And instead of being forgotten, I had a family. I had a home. I had Golowduyn to always watch over me."

Gavin had known all along that the lighthouse meant a great deal to Abigail, but he never truly understood why until that moment. How happy he was that he had been able to help her save this place that meant so much to her.

The fire crackled in the silence between them. Abigail seemed peaceful, and Gavin hesitated to interrupt her thoughts, but his questions refused to cease.

"Why did your uncle not bring you to Cornwall earlier?" he asked softly. "Or at least remove you from the school?"

"He did not know of my existence until then," she replied. "Apparently, his mother revealed the truth about me on her deathbed. And he immediately set out to find me."

"And your father did not?"

"No. I know very little of the man. Only that he was very wealthy before he lost it all to gaming."

Of course. Gavin pressed a hand to his temple. No wonder Abigail disliked playing cards so greatly. The obsession with gaming ran thickly through her family.

“Uncle Ellis often spoke of his disapproval of his brother tarnishing the family name with his immoral behavior,” she said. “He knew of my father’s gaming habits, so he used his living to build Golowduyn and left Grinston Hall and his brother’s reputation behind.”

“Did he ever see him again?”

“Not after their mother’s death. A year after I was brought to Cornwall, we received word that my father ended his own life, but not before losing his entire fortune and estate.” She sniffed with derision. “My uncle claimed to be different, said he would never fall like his brother had. But I suppose he was wrong.” Her eyes hardened before she glanced to Gavin with a sigh. “So, there you have it. The noble history of the Moores. How pleased you must be to have married into such disgrace.”

Her shame was apparent. She clearly thought very little of herself, and of her past. But Gavin could no longer allow it to continue.

He sat forward, facing her squarely. “Abigail, you are far more than your family’s choices. You choose to be strong, when you could easily be claimed as a victim of your childhood. You choose altruism in being a lighthouse keeper, when you could be selfish.” He peered into her eyes, speaking with sincerity he hoped she believed. “I hope you will one day realize, that no matter your history, no matter who did or did not raise you—no matter where you were brought up—your own selfless decisions reveal just the sort of remarkable woman that you are.”

A tear dropped from her eye, leaving a path of moisture trailing down her cheek.

“You must simply believe that you are more,” he whispered. “Because to me…you are everything.”

Their eyes met. Love swelled in his heart. The words settled at the tip of his tongue.

But a loud blast rang through the air, and the sound of glass shattering far above them made Gavin pull Abigail down to the floor and shield her body with his own.

Chapter Fourteen

"Stay low," Gavin commanded, hunching down beside Abigail.

"Was that a gunshot?" she questioned.

"Yes."

"I heard glass breaking," she continued, "but the windows here…"

Their eyes met, worry passing between them before Gavin ran low across the floor, peering up through the window.

"The light," he said, "it is not shining."

Together, they ran through the room, securing the latch at the front door before sprinting up the spiral stairs.

"This is Myles's work," growled Abigail ahead of him. "I'm sure of it."

Gavin's stomach churned. He feared the boy was the cause, as well. "I spoke with Lieutenant Harris this morning. He said Myles returned to St. Just last night."

"You see? It *was* him."

"Focus on reaching the lamps," Gavin replied, breathing heavily as they rounded curve after curve. "We will deal with him later."

"They should already be relit, Gavin. We both know better than to leave the watch room during a storm."

"I know." He could say nothing further to soothe her worries. He had already thought the same.

Their pace slowed as they climbed the tower, neither of them saying another word until they reached the watch room.

Slowly, Gavin poked his head into the lamp room. The refractors still rotated, but most of the lamps had gone out from the swirling wind in the room. A single window pane was shattered nearby, broken glass on the floor lying beneath it.

He relayed the news to Abigail, who stood below in the watch room.

"Is he still out there?" she asked.

He peered past the windows to the ground below and then to where the cliff stood nearly eye-level with the lamps. The sky was darkened due to the storm, but he could still see the land clearly before him. There was no sight of the boy.

"I cannot see him. He must have left after firing."

He heard her groan in frustration. But he could not dwell on the Myles. He needed to relight the lamps.

"Have we a replacement for the window?" he asked.

Her footsteps crossed the floor, objects being shuffled aside before she returned, handing him a small pane of glass and a jar of strong putty.

Working quickly, Gavin cleared the remaining shards of glass from the pane before holding the new glass in place with the putty.

"Is it secure?" Abigail asked, her head sticking up through the latch door.

"I believe so."

"I will help you light the lamps then."

"No, please, stay below." He could not risk her getting injured. "Look to the sea instead."

She hesitated before moving down the steps.

Gavin worked swiftly to relight the lamps before he joined her in the watch room. Together, they stood at the window, looking out over the storm.

"No ship sighted?" he asked.

"Thankfully, no."

They remained silent for a moment before she continued. "Will he fire again, do you think?"

"I don't know," Gavin answered honestly. "But in this storm, it would not be wise to go after him now."

Her arms crossed over her chest. He placed an arm around her shoulder, pulling her close to him. "We will alert the constable as soon as the storm permits. I'm certain Lieutenant Harris will help us, too. But for now, focus on what we *can* do. The light still shines, and the storm will pass."

Abigail rested her head against his shoulder, her arm reaching around his back. He placed a kiss to the top of her head, and together, they stared out at the storm-ridden sea.

* * *

Within a few hours, the skies had cleared; Abigail and Gavin rode for St. Just the moment the sun pierced through the clouds. After posting a letter to Trinity House—alerting them of the destruction that had taken place to their property again—they enlisted Lieutenant Harris and the constable to help keep watch over Golowduyn that

evening.

Knowing they had eyes on the lighthouse helped to ease Abigail's concerns, but how long could they last in such a way? And how long would they be tormented by the boy?

Despite her concern over the growing threat, Abigail could not deny the weight and shame that had lifted from her soul after telling Gavin of her past.

The fact that he remained with her, listened to her every word and still expressed his feelings for her, made her great love for the captain grow in such a measure, she could hardly bear keeping it to herself.

At nightfall, with the lighthouse aglow, Gavin agreed to stay in the watch room while Abigail remained below, listening at the door for any news from Lieutenant Harris or the constable.

Even as the night progressed uneventfully, Abigail found it difficult to rest at all. The threat of danger loomed heavily upon her mind. When she heard Gavin come downstairs for the first refilling, she jumped out of bed, anxious for a distraction.

She met him at the front door when he returned with his pail of oil. They had both remained dressed to be ready should anything occur, but Gavin's shirt hung open at the top, his braces holding his breeches and stretching over his broad shoulders.

"All is well, I assume?" she asked, holding out a candle to light their faces as he closed the door behind him.

He nodded. "Have you been able to sleep at all?"

"I find I am not so tired." A yawn escaped her mouth, betraying her words. In truth, she was exhausted.

"Are you worrying?" Gavin asked as they made for the circular room, pausing at the bottom of the stairs.

"A little. Are you not?"

He set the oil on the first step and peered down at her. "A little," he repeated.

They stared at one another, the candlelight flickering shadows across Gavin's face. His dark eyes focused on her, and she wondered what he was thinking.

No doubt worrying over Myles, the lighthouse. Her own mind was filled with the very same.

But also, something else. Something she longed to share with him. She feared expressing her love, but then, she could not keep her feelings to herself any longer.

"Gavin…"

A muffled noise sounded nearby. She paused, directing her attention to the front door. "Did you hear that?"

"What?"

“I thought…” The sound occurred again. “There, someone is calling out. Is it the lieutenant?”

Gavin darted down the hallway. “Stay inside.”

“Take care, Gavin,” she called after him.

He looked over his shoulder. With a lingering stare in her direction, he nodded and left the house.

She secured the door behind him and raced to the sitting room. Peering through the window, she saw him just before he vanished into the darkness.

“Captain!”

Gavin moved toward the sound of Harris’s voice. His fists clenched in preparation for the struggle that was about to ensue. Harris had found Myles. He was sure of it. And the boy would be putting up a fight.

He ran through the darkness, focusing on the small light in the distance on the pathway leading to Golowduyn.

“Harris?” Gavin called out, running toward him, anxious to give aid to his friend.

But as Gavin neared, he saw Harris hunched toward the ground. “What has happened?”

“I don’t know, sir,” Harris replied. “I discovered him only moments ago.”

Confusion settled on Gavin’s brow.

Discovered who? His footsteps slowed, his eyes honed in on Harris, and only then did Gavin see Myles’s body spread out across the ground.

He hesitated. “Is he…”

“No, but he is badly hurt.”

The light of Harris’s lantern cast low shadows across the boy’s bloodied and bruised face.

“Help me bring him inside,” Gavin directed at once.

They worked together to lift Myles’s unconscious body off of the ground, carrying him to the lighthouse.

“Abigail!” Gavin called out. She opened the door to their home moments later, holding a lantern aloft. “Ready my room!”

She left the door open and disappeared inside. Gavin and Harris maneuvered through the hallways with sidesteps before placing Myles on Gavin’s bed. Abigail had stripped it bare, save a single sheet.

She placed extra candles near the bed and lit a fire in the hearth before disappearing from the room.

The light revealed a large gash on Myles’s brow, blood trickling from his forehead, both nostrils, and his right ear. Gavin’s stomach clenched. “Do we know who could have done this to him?”

“I’ve no idea, sir. I saw his figure in the darkness stumbling toward Golowduyn. I wasn’t certain it was him until I approached, and he merely fell to the ground before me.”

Myles stirred on the bed, a moan coming from his opened mouth.

“Seek out the constable,” Gavin said, “and fetch Mr. Rennalls.”

“Yes, sir,” the lieutenant said.

He left as Abigail returned with water and rags. Myles stirred again.

“Myles?” Gavin spoke softly, moving to the boy’s side and leaning over him. “Can you hear me?”

The boy grimaced, his head shifting from side to side as Abigail removed his wet boots, revealing bare, wrinkled feet. Gavin flinched at the smell.

“Can you tell me who has hurt you?” he asked as the boy groaned.

Myles’s left eye was swollen shut. The blood draining from his body soaked the sheet near his head.

“Abigail, will you help me with his head wound?” he asked, tearing open Myles’s shirt. Newly-formed bruises speckled his ribs and chest.

Abigail slid his hair from his brow and wiped a rag across the blood. The boy tossed again.

“Myles?” Gavin repeated.

Finally, one of his eyes opened before he winced and closed it again. “Cap’n? Where…”

“You are in the lighthouse, Myles,” Gavin explained. “You are badly wounded. A physician has been summoned, but—”

“No!” the boy suddenly cried out.

His eye was wide open, and he pushed Abigail away. Anger surged through Gavin’s chest, and he held the boy’s arms down as Abigail backed away. Gavin would not allow any harm to come to his wife, no matter if the boy was injured or not.

“Calm down,” he said firmly.

“No, not ‘fore I…” Myles’s words slurred together. “Sir, I need to speak with ye. I need to tell ye…”

He pulled his arm from Gavin’s grasp and clawed at his chest, as if wishing to pull his skin aside. His face contorted with agony.

“What happened, Myles?” Gavin asked. “Who did this to you?”

“Dealt with the wrong sort o’ people, sir. Just as I ‘ave me ‘ole life.” His voice was raspy, his pain evident with each word he spoke. “But I deserve the fate that’s comin’.”

Gavin felt a soft hand on his arm. He turned to see Abigail extending a glass of brandy toward him and motioning to Myles.

Gavin nodded his thanks before offering it to the boy.

Myles turned away. “I don’t deserve your ‘elp. Not after what I done.”

His brows turned up, his face crumbling. If Gavin didn’t know better, he would never have believed that this was the same boy who contributed to the shipwreck—who had tampered with the anchor cables, destroyed their property at Golowduyn, and spat on and cursed Gavin.

Myles’s demeanor was completely altered. The anger was gone from his eyes. Only pain and anguish remained.

Gavin couldn’t understand the change, but he also couldn’t bear to see the boy suffering, despite all that he had done. “Rest now, Myles. Do not—”

“‘Twas I,” he said softly, ignoring Gavin’s words. “I done it all.”

Gavin exchanged glances with Abigail, who silently watched the exchange near the bedside.

“I was angry,” Myles said. “I started the fire on the ship, cut the cables, just to keep me brother from hangin’. I never ‘spected ye’d save us. That made me only angrier. And after what you did t’ me brother…ye didn’t deserve ‘appiness. Ye deserved suffering.” He drew in a wheezing breath. “Which is why I…I did what I did ‘ere. I thought if enough ‘appened, ye’d be miserable, same as I.”

Another hoarse breath caused a fit of coughing to overtake him. Blood flew from his mouth across his body and the white sheets. Gavin jerked back but not before being sprayed himself.

“Stop speaking, Myles,” Gavin said. The boy needed to rest, to stop tormenting himself.

“But I was so angry,” Myles continued. “I was so angry that I…I killed ‘im.”

A heavy feeling settled in the pit of Gavin’s stomach. “Who, Myles?”

But the boy’s eyes were no longer on him.

They were focused on Abigail.

Abigail couldn’t breathe.

“Who did you kill, Myles?” came Gavin’s repeated question.

“I’m sorry,” the boy said with a muffled sob. He coughed again, drawing his arm up. Blood dripped from his skin. “I’m sorry. ‘Twas me, ma’am. ‘Twas me who killed your uncle.”

Her whole frame shook, her legs weakened. She took a step back, shaking her head. No, no, the boy was lying. He couldn’t have killed her uncle. Uncle Ellis had slipped off the side of the cliff. He was drunk.

Her head whirled as the boy continued. His eyes were closed, his mouth crinkled as he barely restrained his emotion. “We sat at the

same table in the tavern. We'd 'ad a few drinks before 'e told us the cap'n had taken a likin' to 'is niece. Every game, 'e won, 'til I 'ad nothin' else. I couldn't stand the way 'e praised the cap'n, and then boasted in 'is own winnin'. So I followed 'im."

He shaded his eyes with a shaking hand. "By the cliffs…I'd only meant to take 'is winnings. But 'e told me 'e gave 'em away already to pay off his gamin' from another night. I was so angry, I…I pushed 'im, and 'e fell on the grass and just…just slid. Right over the edge. I didn't mean…I didn't mean to…" Another cry, another cough. Blood drained from the corner of his mouth. "I'm sorry, ma'am. I couldn't die without…without telling ye…I'm sorry."

Tears spilled down Abigail's cheeks. She felt as if she was watching her uncle die right before her eyes again, so fresh was the pain in her heart.

The stench of alcohol on his breath, like Uncle Ellis's. The boy's eyes were blue—like Uncle Ellis's.

Abigail stepped toward him, moving around Gavin and sitting on the bed beside the boy. Myles's shoulders shook as he attempted to restrain his cries and coughs. She raised a rag to his face, wiping the blood spilling down his chin.

"Thank you for your honesty, Myles," she said, her voice soft as she pressed the cool rag to his brow. "Rest now. And know that I forgive you."

* * *

Myles succumbed to his wounds shortly after his confession. After the lamp had been refilled, and Lieutenant Harris, the constable, and Mr. Rennalls left with the body, Abigail had finally broken down. Gavin held her through most of the night, cradling her in his arms until she finally fell into a dreamless sleep.

The next day, they received word that a man who Myles had once worked with at the local farmer's had been arrested for the boy's death. After being robbed by the boy with a gun—which Myles had stolen from his previous employer's—the man had exacted his revenge at night, under the cover of darkness. Myles must have known his death was imminent after the beating, so he stumbled to Golowduyn to admit his guilt before meeting his Maker.

After learning the news, Gavin had ridden to St. Just to deliver his testimony in writing about Myles's state before his death. While he was away, Abigail remained at Golowduyn, pouring over her uncle's old letters and journals.

By the time Gavin returned, dinner had come and gone, but there was still light enough for them to take a walk up to Uncle Ellis's gravesite on the cliff behind Golowduyn.

Gulls cried above their heads, and the sea sparkled in the evening light. A few pink flowers dotted the edge of the cliff—the last remaining of the season. Abigail stared at the foot of the grave, grass just beginning to sprout on top of the dirt.

"I have not been up here since Uncle's funeral," she said, taking a deep breath of the fresh air around her. "After I learned what he did, I could hardly bear to think of him. But after Myles's confession last night, I was relieved to discover that Uncle had not chosen to leave me after all. In truth, he fought for me until the very end."

She raised the small book she had clasped in her hands. "His journal. I left it untouched in the bottom of his trunk, unable to read his words until this morning. There are many pages in which he expressed his struggle with drinking and gaming. But he always ended each entry with these words." She turned to a page and read aloud. "'Remember Abigail. Remember why you brought her to Golowduyn. Remember to give her the life that she deserves.'"

She lowered the book and looked to Gavin, whose dark eyes shone with tears of his own. With a smile, she turned, taking a step forward and kneeling before her uncle's grave.

Her whispers disappeared on the wind as she spoke. "I am sorry you could not overcome your past, Uncle. But I wish you to know, I am overcoming mine."

She remained there for a moment, drawing in a deep breath as she felt the pain of her past life lifting from her heart, easing with each moment that passed by.

Yes, she *was* moving on from her past. All with help from Gavin.

She looked over her shoulder and saw him patiently waiting for her, his eyes filled with understanding and compassion.

She stood and returned to his side.

"My uncle did his best," she said, "so that is the memory I will keep of him."

They shared a smile, and moved away from the grave, heading down the curved pathway toward the lower cliffside.

"May I ask you a question, Abigail?" Gavin spoke quietly, continuing after she nodded. "How were you able to find forgiveness for Myles after what he'd done?"

She gathered her thoughts for a moment before her eyebrows drew together. "How could I begrudge the boy whose life I understood so fully? When I looked at him last night, I saw my uncle reflected in his eyes…and myself. Not who I have become, but who I was before—a lonely child, mistreated by those who should have loved me best. I shudder to think how my life might have mirrored Myles's, had Uncle not brought me here…or had *you* never come to Golowduyn."

They reached the cliff's edge, the glowing sun shining before

them, the ocean's waves rolling softly toward the shore below.

She turned to face him. "Which is why I need to ask you if you are truly happy with your life here."

He brushed the hair blowing past her brow. "Abigail, you know that I am."

"Yes, but will your happiness last? You have sacrificed everything for me, Gavin. And now I wish to return the favor. So, if you truly do not wish to lead your life here any longer, I will support your decision and we can sell the lighthouse."

He leaned forward, disbelief written across his face as he narrowed his eyes. "Abigail, do you honestly believe I could even entertain such an idea? After all the work we have put in, the sacrifices we have made. Have we not been fighting for Golowduyn from the very beginning?"

"Of course we have, and I would continue fighting for it for the rest of my days. But you deserve the right to choose your own life. A life not dictated by the lighthouse…or my own desires."

"I have told you, Abigail. I chose you. And I will not leave you."

"No. I know that now. I meant…I would go with you."

His brow softened. "You would leave the lighthouse?"

"For you, I would. I can only imagine one thing worse than losing Golowduyn, and that would be losing you."

A half-smile tugged at his lips. He broke their eye contact for a single moment as he reached into his jacket pocket and produced a small box.

She eyed it curiously as he removed the lid, then gasped when he pulled out a gold and turquoise ring.

He reached forth, placing the ring on her finger. "This is only a small token to remind you of my devotion to you. My hope is that you will look at this ring each day and remember that my happiness with you here will last forever." He took a step toward her, caressing her cheek with his thumb. "I love Cornwall and living so near the sea. I love the purpose the lighthouse brings to my life. But more importantly, I love you, the woman behind the light of Golowduyn. For you saved a man not only lost at sea, but in life, as well."

The admission of his love did not take Abigail by surprise, nor did it send her mind spinning. For deep down, she had known all along his feelings for her.

Rather, a peace settled deep within her heart—an overwhelming sense of gratitude and love filled her soul.

She placed a hand against Gavin's cheek. "I love *you*, Gavin. But then…you already knew that."

Their eyes locked. He drew closer to her, and their lips met in a tender kiss. She reached up, sliding her fingers through his hair, and

he sighed in response.

Gone were the fears of her past, gone was her concern for her future. For she knew Gavin would be with her every step of the way.

Their lips parted, he took her hand in his, and together, they walked toward the lighthouse and their bright future ahead.

Epilogue

Abigail and Gavin walked hand-in-hand across the cliffside as the sun hung above the ocean. The days were finally growing longer after the many winter months, allowing them the opportunity to spend more time away from the lamps.

The sky glowed a deep orange and red, perfectly reflected in the still sea. They paused at the edge of the cliff, Golowduyn shining nearby as they took in the view. Winter had lessened the colors around them, but the promise of spring made its first appearance in the grass growing greener, and the hint of pink wildflowers near the cliff's edge.

Abigail drew in a deep breath, relishing the feel of the wind blowing her hair from her temples. The sunshine above disguised the bitterly cold wind, and Abigail shivered, despite her thick pelisse.

"You have been quiet this evening, my love," Gavin said. He brought her hand up to kiss the back of it.

"Simply enjoying the scenery."

"It has been some time since we've been able to do so," Gavin said. "What with how busy you have been attending balls and hosting dinner parties. I hardly recognize the woman you have become." His eyes shone with a teasing light.

"One," she replied. "I have attended one ball. And inviting the Summerfields and Causeys to dine with us hardly constitutes a dinner party."

"Our list of guests will grow when my brother visits again."

"That will not be for months yet," Abigail said.

They had received a letter from Lionel only weeks before, wherein he expressed his desire to return to Cornwall. However, he and his wife planned to stay instead at a rented manor far enough away from the sea to avoid Gertrude's headaches returning.

Abigail had been surprisingly pleased to hear the news of their return. She knew Gavin would enjoy seeing his brother again, and she

would not mind their visits in smaller amounts either.

Besides, in months when they *did* finally arrive, Abigail would be far too preoccupied with another matter.

She pressed a hand to her stomach with a smile and looked out to the sea. A passing ship sailed nearby, white sails unfurled as it glided across the water.

"Have you received any word from Lieutenant Harris?" she asked.

"Only that he has settled in with his new captain. I suspect he misses Cornwall, though."

"I do hope he will return, as he said he would."

After his arm had healed, Lieutenant Harris had been reassigned, and Abigail and Gavin had hired another assistant to watch over Golowduyn with them. Their new assistant was a hard worker, but Abigail missed the lieutenant's cheerful spirits. And she was sure Gavin did, as well.

"I'm certain he will come back, one day. Cornwall has captured him, just as it has me."

His eyes were warm as he smiled down at her.

"Well, if he does return" Abigail said, "he is more than welcome to stay with us this time, rather than the inn. Though, we will need to have added another room to our humble home by then. After all, we shall surely have three living under our roof."

"Three?" Gavin questioned. His cocked his head.

"Yes. You and I…and the baby."

Gavin turned to face her directly, his eyes narrowing. "You mean to say you are…with child?"

She beamed.

"You're certain?" he asked.

"I am."

She could see the delight in his eyes, his shoulders raising as he reached forth to kiss her soundly.

With his lips on hers, Abigail's heart soared. How she loved the man. She could not wait to share that happiness, that love, with a child of their own.

When their kiss ended, she leaned against him with a deep sigh, and Gavin rested his cheek on her brow, wrapping his arms around her.

They stood as one on the cliffside, watching the gentle waves glinting beneath the last rays of the departing sun. Nothing could diminish the deep joy they felt. For even Golowduyn's glowing beacon was still not as radiant as the love shared between the old lighthouse keeper's niece and the rescued sea captain, who had set aflame the light within her heart.

THE END

Other Titles by Deborah M. Hathaway

Stand Alone Novels
A Secret Fire
When Two Rivers Meet
To Warm a Wintered Heart

A Cornish Romance Series
On the Shores of Tregalwen, a Prequel Novella
Behind the Light of Golowduyn, Book One

Author's Note

The idea of this book first came to me on a family trip to Oregon in 2016 as we visited the Yaquina Bay Lighthouse. I became fairly obsessed with the majestic, noble structure. I knew from that point forth that I needed to write a book about a lighthouse of my own. And what better place for that lighthouse to be than on the dramatic coast of Cornwall?

Since that initial idea, I've written and rewritten this novel, trying to express my love for Cornwall, the Regency era, and the relationship between Gavin and Abigail. This story was extremely difficult to create, but it is straight from my heart.

If you enjoyed this book, I hope you will consider leaving a review. Reviews help authors so much. I would greatly appreciate it!

If you want to receive the latest news about my future novels, sign up for my newsletter! I always share new and discounted clean romance novels, as well as fun polls, quotes, and giveaways. My newsletter subscribers are also the first to see sneak peeks and cover reveals!

Make sure to follow me on Facebook (for more clean romance deals) and Instagram (for photos of my travels to the UK and more)!

I hope to connect with you soon!

Happy reading,
Deborah

Acknowledgements

This book would never have seen the light of day were it not for the many people in my life who have helped me through these three years of writing, rewriting (and rewriting again).

First, I wish to thank my husband. Oh, Christian. You are my very own "Gavin." With your endless patience and constant offers of help—not to mention your hot British accent—I honestly don't know how I got so lucky. I only hope you didn't marry me because you felt indebted to me. (Did you???) Truly, without your support, I wouldn't have pursued this dream of writing. I love you more than I love Cornwall. And that's saying something.

Next, I have to express my gratitude to my family. I hope the free ARCs I gave you make up for the first draft you had to read that was 300 pages too long. Thanks for taking a chance on this final draft. Hopefully it's better…

I need to thank my Grandma Cox, too, for rereading my novels countless times, and always asking me when my next book is coming out—even after a new release. Thank you for your support. I love you!

I would be ungrateful if I didn't thank my editor. You first helped me see that Abigail was a giant pain in the backside and that I needed to change her if I didn't want readers slamming their heads against the book (which I'm pretty sure you were doing that entire first read-through). Thanks for bearing with me and helping me find the true Abigail hidden beneath that very-angry shell.

This book would also not be here without the help of my lovely beta readers. You girls saved me big time. Who would have figured I needed inner-thoughts and romance scenes in a romance novel??

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About the Author

Deborah M. Hathaway graduated from Utah State University with a degree in English and an emphasis in Creative Writing. As a young girl, she devoured Jane Austen's novels while watching and re-watching every adaptation of Pride & Prejudice she could, entirely captured by all things Regency and romance.

Throughout her early life, she wrote many short stories, poems, and essays, but it was not until after her marriage that she was finally able to complete her first romance novel, attributing the completion to her courtship with, and love of, her charming, English husband. Deborah finds her inspiration for her novels in her everyday experiences with her husband and children and during her travels to the United Kingdom, where she draws on the beauty of the country in such places as Ireland, Yorkshire, and her beloved Cornwall.